Philosophy's Burden:

An Arendtian Assessment of Scrolling

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ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to recount Hannah Arendt's theories of (1) the distinction between thinking and common-sense reasoning, (2) the historical philosophical conflation of these two activities in Western thought (3) the world as a uniquely human artifice, and (4) the existential risk to common-sense reasoning in the absence of thinking. I seek to apply Arendt's thinking to the postmodern phenomenon of scrolling social media memes and define the scrolling epidemic as the most recent manifestation of a long thread within the philosophical tradition. Further, this thesis will attempt to effectively communicate this narrative across socio-economic backgrounds as a means of making philosophy more accessible to the common mind.

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Orientation

Introduction to the Introduction

Once upon a time, I was but a lowly commoner – a college dropout forced to find purpose in the basest of life's pleasures.[1] I indulged in the rapid production and consumption of friendships and lovers, foods and substances, and jobs and hobbies. To find deeper meaning in those ever-revolving pleasures I held faithfully to memes and attended scrolling services nightly. Unlike the churchgoing elders, who dutifully hate any congregation save the one that they are assigned to, the church of social media does not discriminate. A believer may pursue the message of memes at whichever location they please be it Facebook, X, or Reddit – just to name a few – indeed, ideally, the Scroller attends them all.[2i]

That was, until I was saved by an intervention – the story of which has already been told elsewhere and does not have much relevance here – and turned away from the memetic myths of the false digital prophets.[3] I practiced intense digital asceticism for eighteen months – a virtual blink for anyone born before the fall of the Berlin Wall but a lifetime for those who shared the crib with Google. I braved the raw, face-to-face engagement with bank tellers; I gathered news

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[1] Many terms are used by philosophers to refer to non-philosophers, and they are all insulting. Most recently, I heard a philosopher refer to people as "common reasoners," as if this "kind" phrase entitled him to make claims about the people of the world as he looked down upon them. I employ the term "commoners" here to mock the academic discipline of philosophy, and to any who would balk at my use of it and say, "Don't call them that!" I would ask – who is *them*?

[2] The analogy drawn here between scrolling memes and attending church is for the purposes of entertainment. While there is an intuition that something existentially similar happens within the mind of the Scroller and the mind of the devout believer – and I, myself, seek to outline the root of that similarity in this essay – to say that scrolling is the "new religion" is to commit the sin of functionalism. As Arendt said – "even if under certain queer circumstances, it should occur that two different things play the same 'functional role,' I would no more think them identical than I would think the heel of my shoe is a hammer when I use it to drive a nail into the wall."

[3] For the details of the intervention story please see Maryville College's article on my undergraduate thesis: https://www.maryvillecollege.edu/news/2023/self-discovery-leads-to-maryville-college-alumnas-senior-study/

from archaic bundles of dead tree parts; I exposed my body to the elements to find out the weather; I mastered T9.[4] It was bitter work, and I was persecuted on all fronts. My own kind turned on me, seeing my journey as a display of arrogance, and the elders continuously mocked me by constantly feigning authentic confusion, asking me things like, "What's so impressive about going to the bank?"

While there were some manifestations that hinted at something really happening – my credit score rose two-hundred points, for example – there was no physical reflection of the change within me. It wasn't like when you transition to better shampoo and can show your friends before and after photos of your recovered split ends. People recognized that my worldly circumstances were improving, but when they asked me about the details of my journey I was at a loss for words. It was surely a real experience, but how real can something be if it cannot be shown to the senses or explained in concepts? The wonder at the feeling of a drastic change in my psyche, and the ever-present doubt that anything real was happening at all, drove me to the study of philosophy. I thought, "There will surely be answers there. I will go and find them and bring them back to the common world to share with my friends."

And answers I did find; massive worlds of words that name all the invisible experiences of the mind – Plato's *Republic* for the arrogant; Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* for the meek; Sade's *Juliette* for the wicked; Epictetus' *Discourses* for the weak. For a time, I was truly satisfied. Lost in the systems of metaphysics and phenomenal distinctions, I was like a child in a toy store on my birthday. But when it came time to go back – as there is an increasingly urgent need to tell my friends that they too can be free – I found that the answers did not translate into the common tongue. I was no longer mute, but I was literally speaking Greek. The same feelings

[4] A predictive texting language used on early cellphones – "text on 9 keys"

of doubt that motivated me to go to the philosophical world to find proof that my change was real followed me back into the world of the common – are any of these answers *real?* For such a self-reverent discipline, philosophy is largely irrelevant; most philosophers are lost in the haze of their naval gaze, but I thought that Plato said that we were supposed to leave the cave?[5][ii]

Here, Readers, is where my first – and largely implicit – argument begins. It is my duty as a philosophy master's candidate to write for you, Scholars, a thesis in which I convince you to take some position on some idea within some system of thought – for example: *I will argue that, though it conflicts with our formal rational interest in self-governance to use AI in decision-making, we have a substantive final interest of reason in realizing our own rational capacities and are presumptively permitted by reason to strengthen our rational powers by consulting ChatGPT* [6] – because the academy believes that if I can write a really long essay on a very narrow topic that other philosophers can also read and understand, then I can claim to have successfully demonstrated my education. But why do essays have to be dense and technical to be "philosophical?" And why should only the few people who are nutty enough to major in philosophy get to learn what I've learned? As Cole asks – "What good is the bread if my [homies] is broke? / What good is first class if my [homies] can't sit?"[iii]

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[5] When speaking on our tradition, Arendt recounts the endless conceptual reversals of Western philosophy – "sensualism and idealism, materialism and spiritualism, immanentism and transcendentalism" – and notes that philosophers seem to have forgotten the point of the cave allegory. Philosophers were meant to leave behind the world of human affairs to seek out eternal truths and wisdom, with the ultimate goal of bringing those enlightened ideas back into the world. Instead, philosophers today, hidden away in their towers, pick and choose from collections of books ideas that suit their social arguments; they treat ideas as value commodities which can be exchanged as needed. They do *not* seek to transcend the world but merely study the shadows in one corner of it. "These are men who have decided never to leave what to Plato was 'the cave.'"

[6] An actual thesis statement from one of my term papers. Sorry you had to read that Homies.

The fundamental problem with philosophy is that most philosophical essays are too boring and niche for most people's taste, and so the majority of individuals are excluded from the conversation. I want to share my thoughts in a way that is accessible to everyone and makes for good, diverse discussions, and so, Scholars, I must decline your request for an academic thesis. I will instead present my story – as all philosophical theories are just stories, and I would never be so arrogant as to claim to have discovered the "truth" about life, the universe, and everything – in a dramatically oversimplified way to make for an entertaining and digestible read, and I claim that my method is legitimate. There is nothing intentionally written here that is factually – historically or philosophically – incorrect; my homies may confidently recite claims from this story whenever, wherever they need – whether as a reminder to themselves, or as a defense against the toxic stories of others. Still, I recognize that this enterprise might fail; I accept that you may not see in it sufficient grounds for proof of a robust philosophical education; nevertheless, as Socrates said best, "'It would be better for me . . . that multitudes of men should disagree with me rather than that I, being one, should be out of harmony with myself and contradict me.'"[iv]

Introduction

We will begin by introducing the world as a uniquely human construction atop the Earth. By "world" I just mean the humanization of the physical universe – the way we utilize natural resources to our advantage and use language to share ideas. The shape of the world changes over time, but the existence of a world as such is a seemingly timeless, essential condition for human life. Today, as the shape of our world rapidly shifts under new digital technologies, there is an increasingly popular sentiment that the world, itself, is doomed – and I endorse this conclusion as a sound judgement of the current state of affairs. Given the fact that we have

always been dissatisfied with our condition as worldly beings who suffer and don't understand why, and so have always preferred to fantasize about magical, other, more perfect worlds, it is entirely reasonable to believe that we will continue our pattern of rejecting the real world as our true home and thus thoughtlessly let it pass into extinction. After introducing the nature of our world and outlining the details of my claim, we will take a moment to discuss the methodology of this enterprise.

As natural beings – nothing more, biologically, than fancy animals – we make a home on this Earth, and we call it 'world'. This is, in some ways, no different than a beaver making a dam or a bird building a nest. All critters make use of nature's material as a means of tempering the effects of their weather, establishing viable sources of food, and ensuring a safe space for reproduction. But not only do we humans construct a shelter, we fill it with all sorts of other creations like art, ideals, trade treaties and Labubus – whatever those are supposed to be. Because the world is a communal space, what we can create and consume within it depends on the creation and consumption of others; only a shared world can facilitate and preserve a robust and healthy human society. Without a shared world, humans would cease to exist as civilized beings – we might not go extinct, but we would surely devolve into mere animals operating under the basic, brutal instincts of survival.

Because the world itself appears to exist before any one individual enters it and seemingly survives after any individual leaves it – usually, although we will see that there are historical and contemporary cases where the belief in the permanence of the world has disappeared – we make and maintain it as if it is eternal. World-building – constructing cities and making alliances – would be a meaningless pursuit if there was not a continuous worldly

existence that transcended our individual lifetimes. In virtue of its continuity, the world also provides the opportunity for individuals to leave their mark on history. Individuals who think and act in outstanding ways inspire both idealistic and cautionary tales that survive well beyond their own deaths, and without a world to share their stories the history of human exceptionalism would be lost. The phenomenon – Homies, this means 'the thing we see' – of fame first requires a shared world to perform within, and legendary immortality – fame that transcends generations – presupposes the expected permanence of the world.[v]

Not only the timeless tales of the most extraordinary people, but the real, everyday experiences of you and I depend on the stability and durability of the world. We need the reassurance of being publicly seen and for our experiences to be commonly recognized to maintain our sense of a shared reality. The psychological danger of isolation is that when we are limited to our own subjective experiences, we begin to lose the connection between what is really going on in the world and what is merely in our heads. Any experienced abuser knows that in order to successfully gaslight their victim they must first separate them from those who they might confide their experiences in. If you have ever lived alone for a prolonged period of time without even the company of a pet, I'm sure you can recall occasions where you questioned the reality of some noise or another and were forced to accept that it might just as well be a trick of your mind. The interconnectedness of the world is the guarantor that what we experience is real.

The nature of the world has changed many times over the course of our history, and the eras of thought and the phases of the world they produce are not the same thing. For example, we currently live in the modern world, but we have thoroughly entered the postmodern era. Homies, you should know that in academia 'modernity' refers to the age that begins immediately following the end of feudal society – roughly 1500. In everyday life we also normally use the

term ‘modern’ to just mean “contemporary,” but in this story it will always refer to its specific historical era of thinking. The mark of the modern is generally defined by the revolutions of science and the glorification of reason – often called the Age of Enlightenment. According to the story I will present here, the modern era – the period of time – spanned between the arrival of Galileo’s telescope – roughly 1609 – and the rise of the World Wide Web in the 1990s, but the shape of the world – the shared picture of reality that developed during the modern era – did not become modern overnight. Likewise, the notion of a “post” modern era is becoming an increasingly popular idea as thinkers begin to recognize that the shape of the world is once again shifting; the structures of the modern world are no longer adequate to the ways in which postmodern humans think and act together, but it remains to be seen what shape the postmodern world will take – or it if will take at all.

In the postmodern era, the very basic conditions of the world appear to me to be under threat. Despite the self-evident, damning witness of our very own eyes that nature is increasingly threatening our world’s survival – and therefore the survival of our species – and the equally obvious fact that the civil ideals of freedom and justice are fading from the common mind,[7] not enough is being done to buttress our infrastructure or inspire hope for the fight against wicked people. And while reality has always been subject to manipulation, until now we have always thought of ourselves as a species that pursues the truth of the matter – whether we really did or not. But today, in the postmodern era, we no longer seem to care if the things we see and talk about are true – reality is now apparently irrelevant.

[7] My use of this term does not refer to Dr. Mariam Thalos’ new book *Reasoning in the Wild* – not yet, anyway.

I think that these two trends are related – I think the inability to collectively, as a people, solve both our epistemic (Homies – this word means "relating to knowledge") and ecological crises is rooted in our diminished ability to discern the truth of the world. The existential urge to ask questions about our reality – for example, to legitimately question what our politicians are up to or to ask questions about the truth of climate science – is fading from common experience. People are giving up on the idea of a real, shared world, and in doing so they have already begun to give up the most basic act of world-building – asking questions. I fear, truly Reader, that the postmodern era will be the end of question-asking and the beginning of the end of the permanence of the world.

Why are people no longer concerned with the truth of reality? Many will blame this seemingly sudden shift towards radical worldlessness on the arrival of the internet and claim that all was well before social media; privileged academics love to present the doomscroller as the epitome of the "irrational" and morally negligent commoner who is ruining the modern world – as if the act of scrolling news articles that disparage the doomscroller is not itself an act of doomscrolling. Against these thinkers, I will argue that the threat to world-building goes much deeper – I believe that the roots of our current crisis of worldlessness have been spreading since the inception of the Western world. Relying on Hannah Arendt's ideas about the history of Western society as well as the history of Western thinking, I will claim that the practice of abandoning the reality of our world for what is imaginary and more pleasing has been academically and systematically reframed and handed down throughout history; indeed, I will blame metaphysical philosophy.

According to Arendt, metaphysics – Homies, I will explain this soon – is a worldless[8][vi] activity that confuses the meaningful experience of reflective thinking with the experience of accruing real knowledge about the world via common-sense reasoning. This essay will trace the historical influence of metaphysical thinking on our relationship with the world and argue that the postmodern rejection of science and the contemporary mass adoption of memes is its legacy. We will first start with the basics of thinking and common-sense reasoning and see how those activities became confused in ancient Greek philosophies at the cost our common-sensical claims about the world. Then we will follow that thread of confusion and worldlessness throughout the historical ideas of Plato, Christianity, the Romans, Descartes, Kant, and Hegel. I will not comprehensively recount the manifestation of worldlessness in these thinkers or in Western philosophy as a whole – Arendt's *Life of the Mind*[vii] has already done this for us – but I will tease out the most relevantly influential through-line of our tradition's compulsion of denying reality for fantasy. We will further track that influence in the rise and fall of trust in scientific truth, and, finally, explore its newest manifestation in humanity's absolute, unquestioning absorption of social media memes.

In the process of making my explicit argument – that we should place the burden of responsibility for the current crisis on philosophy – I will be making an overarching and implicit argument via my methodology. I believe that this enterprise must bring both Scholars and

[8] The phenomenon of worldlessness is one of the main themes in Hannah Arendt's "The Human Condition." She traces at least two historical roots – one being in the Christian attitude towards worldly life and the other in the laboring experience in capitalist society. Both the Christian and the laborer have a worldless existence in that they are not meaningfully engaged in maintaining the continuity of the world. Our use of it in this essay is best summarized by Arendt's statement; "Worldlessness as a political phenomenon is possible only on the assumption that the world will not last; on this assumption, however, it is almost inevitable that worldlessness, in one form or another, will begin to dominate the political scene."

Homies into one conversation to see the ways in which the world's ideas translate across different experiences as only shared stories can facilitate a shared world. Part One of this story will be primarily written for the Homies; I will teach the history of these ideas in a way that is actually understandable, and Scholars will read along as if they are observing my lesson in the classroom. I believe that Scholars will find value in seeing philosophy from the Homies' perspective – at the least, they will be forced to see what kind of language is needed to make philosophy sufficiently translatable into the common tongue – and thus might reconsider their responsibilities to the world as professional thinkers. In Part Two, I will educate the Scholars on the influence of philosophical thinking in contemporary attitudes towards science and show that the crisis in truth is indeed – at least conceptually – philosophy's fault. Homies may read the second half of this story as one of validation – they will watch as I demonstrate the inadequacy of science to make our lives better, and the real, damaging influence of science's self-proclaimed authority. In the final section, I will argue that the explosion of social media use is both a rebellion against philosophy and yet a wholly traditional philosophical move.

Homies, I share this story with you to offer you some scaffolding for the contradictory thoughts and feelings that plague us in our daily lives, some mental world-building material if you will. I truly believe that if we commoners – those of us without the privilege of access to a philosophical education – had a better understanding of the origins of some of our thoughts – especially the ones we use in times of crisis – that they would lose their grip on our psyches; notions like "everything happens for a reason," and "Heaven," and "trust the process," are toxically common ideas that were once mere thoughts in a philosopher's head.[viii] Knowing the context of those thoughts allows us to humanize their origins; knowing where an idea comes from makes it less powerful. By learning the history of the ideas that shape our way of engaging

with the world, we can unlearn harmful thought patterns that prevent us from finding real meaning in our lives as we experience them. Scholars, I understand that you may protest at my following accusations, and indeed reel at my reductive accounting of our tradition's greatest thinkers, but I must insist that you read this piece for what it is, namely, a story, and ask yourself upon finishing not about the truth of it, but *what it means* if it is true. Scholars and Homies, let us begin.

Part One

Thinking and Common-sense Reasoning[ix]

In keeping with the norms of the common world, recapping and signposting will be at the beginning of each section. In the common world, sequential segments of narratives end without explanation, and new segments begin with "previously on" – as in "previously on Lost." This structure is more intuitive to the Homies – and, in truth, to me.

In this section, we will begin by reviewing Hannah Arendt's insightful distinction between the mind's activity of thinking and the brain's activity of common-sense reasoning. We will then see – according to Arendt and Arendtian scholar Susan Neiman – how and why these activities were confused by the ancient philosophers. This erroneous confusion has been widely missed – perhaps ignored – by philosophy throughout history and still pervades much of the academy today. Scholars, remember that Part One is primarily written for the Homies, and so further information on Arendt's theories and how I am applying them can be found in the endnotes.

There are two types of silent, internal activities, and from here on out we will always refer to one as "thinking" and the other as "common-sense reasoning." Both are always related to the world; we use our common-sense reasoning to navigate our lived experiences, and then, later, we think and reflect to ourselves about those experiences. For example, I use my common-sense reasoning when I unpack and put away the contents of my backpack after a long day at the quarry, but, as I unpack, I think to myself about how wonderful the day was on the water. While the two activities are necessarily related to each other – Homies, in philosophy, 'necessarily' means that they are linked by cosmic glue – they are not the same thing. My main aim in this story is to make explicit to you, Readers, the distinction between them and to show you how we

have historically blurred that distinction. Much of our existential woes as a species are in virtue of continuously confusing thinking with common-sense reasoning – to such an extent that, today, people are rapidly losing the ability to do either.

Our common-sense, the activity of our brain, reasons directly within the world; the silent activity of reasoning accompanies us as we move about reality. When we think, we withdraw from direct engagement with the physical world – we go "inward" and discuss the happenings of life with ourselves. Whereas the brain interacts with the world via common-sense reasoning, the mind – the location of thinking – interacts with only itself, but that is not to say that thinking is not concerned with worldly content. For example, when I think to myself about my summer plans to swim at the quarry, I don't think – "I'll take a right turn out of my apartment complex and then a left turn onto the main drag . . ." That would be an explicit worldly plan – an expression of common-sense reasoning. Rather, I might think, "I can't wait to swim at the quarry! I wonder who I'll bring with me – maybe her? I don't know, last year she came with me, and I realized way too late that she is not a very good swimmer. Maybe I'll just go alone." Thinking is not about learning how to execute a plan in the world but is rather the wholly mental activity of silently talking to yourself about those plans and your worldly experiences.

Now that you know about the distinction between thinking and common-sense reasoning, next you need to know that thinking is to meaning as common-sense reasoning is to knowledge. We reason with our common-sense to learn facts about the world, but we think about the meaning of that knowledge in our everyday lives. Common-sense reasoning results in knowing what is *true* about the world, while thinking "does not ask what something is or whether it exists at all – its existence is always taken for granted – *but what it means for it to be*."[x] It is a fact – it is a truth – that the mitochondria is the powerhouse of the cell, but what that means to us in our

lived experience is really nothing at all. Scholars, to bring you in on the joke, “the mitochondria is the power house of the cell” was such an important fact in school, yet is so meaningless in everyday life, that it has become a euphemism in the memes for any fact that is true, but useless, and therefore not worth knowing.

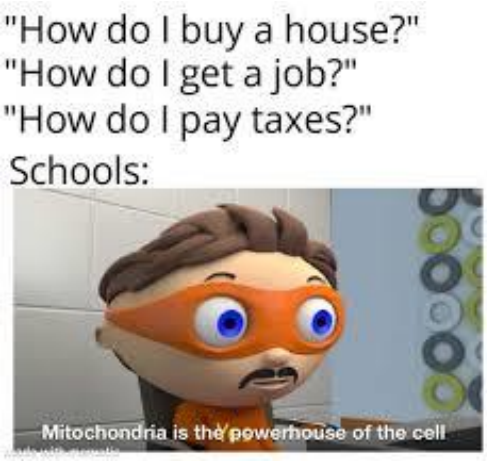


Figure 1: Mitochondria Meme

Of course, if you suffer from a mitochondrial disorder this fact might be highly meaningful to you, but you cannot convince someone else that it is meaningful with the same authority that you can tell them that it is true. Knowledge is universal, but meaning is subjective.

Thinking is to storytelling as common-sense reasoning is to learning. We use common-sense as a means to an end, while thinking is an end in itself. Homies, think about the difference between swimming laps at the gym pool *to get fit* versus swimming at the quarry because it’s beautiful. The gym pool is a means – exercise – to the end – fitness. A quarry float is the end goal itself; it is done for its own sake. When we reason, we ask questions about the objects of the world and phenomena in nature and use our common-sense to pursue their answers via observation, calculations, and scientific experimentation. Contrarily, when we think, we replay the happenings of some event and ask ourselves about who was doing what and why. We don’t ask meaningful questions because it serves some set end – meaning is not something that can be

stored up and distributed like knowledge – but because the mental activity of story-making is an end in itself; thinking is done for its own sake.

Thinking is to mind as common-sense reasoning is to brain. The brain makes sense of life's experiences by naming objects, mapping the relationships between those objects with language, and recognizing which causes produce which effects. The mind, on the other hand, chats with itself about the happenings of daily life. For example, if I was to knock my coffee over onto my keypad, my brain would quickly reason through the facts that, one, gravity will rapidly pull the fluid into my keys and, two, liquid damages technology. Common-sense would prompt me to immediately flip my laptop over so that the coffee drips out of my device instead of deeper into it. Afterwards, my mind might think to itself about how lucky I am that I'm quick enough to compensate for my clumsiness. The lesser and greater ability to common-sensically reason is in virtue of more or less brain power – the degree of which varies across individuals – but the mind's ability to talk to itself is universally accessible, though that is not to say that it is always utilized to the extent that it could be.

Thinking and common-sense reasoning can, and often do, overlap. This story is not a transcript of my thinking, though it is inspired by it. I find these ideas very meaningful, but there is no chance of convincing you, Readers, to see it from my perspective without the employment of common-sense – without the reasonable arrangement of words with their inherent definitions in a way that is more or less grammatically correct and more or less reflective of common worldly experiences. I am not articulating truth – not sharing knowledge – but I am trying to illuminate certain phenomena and asking you to join me in thinking about their meaning.

So, as you can see, thinking and common-sense reasoning are not the same thing, but, since the beginning, they have been philosophically confused and equated.

As thinking beings, as a unique species on this Earth quite different from any other animal, our minds have the ability to go beyond the limitations of our common-sense and imagine a world outside of this one – despite having no evidence that it exists at all. Religious thinking in all of its manifestations is a testament to this universal mental ability. When these mythical stories begin to be seen as more true than the world we interact with via common-sense – when we begin to view the imaginary world as more real than this one – I will call it "otherworldliness." Metaphysics is the philosophical study of the reality of otherworlds – 'meta' means behind, after, or beyond – and how these imaginary worlds are supposedly connected to the physical world via cosmic glue. Homies, the most common otherworldly idea is Heaven; Scholars, you might think of Plato's metaphysics.

Ancient philosophers, in virtue of living in city-states where all of their physical needs were met through military victory and slavery, had the time to turn their attention to the stars and begin pursing knowledge of the universe itself. Their common-sense reasoned something like: The physical world is always changing – things are born, grow, and die – yet, since everything is more or less the same it seems that there must be some secret, nonphysical blueprint to it all and so they embarked on a thought journey to discover this otherworldly master plan. I caution you, Homie, against thinking, "well, duh, it's DNA and evolution." We will see that this move is not only too simple but perpetuates the underlying problem. Besides, where did evolution come from? How did life on this planet come to be in the first place? How and why is there anything at all when the rest of space appears to be a lifeless vacuum? Is the Big Bang really any more believable – or meaningfully any different – than God the Creator? These questions search for the otherworldly origins of evolution and DNA – it is the same kind of thinking. The root of faulty common-sense reasoning – the focus on the otherworld - goes much deeper than the

limitations of primitive science or of having too much time on your hands to think – it is built into our reason itself.

The urge to treat the mind's other-worldly thinking as if it is an experience of the brain's common-sense has been described as a kind of narcissism: "reason's narcissism." Philosopher Susan Neiman – a contemporary follower of Arendt – offers this term for "the belief that we can find a reason for everything the world presents."[xi] [xii] Basically, the brain expects its processes to be mirrored in the world; the error is essentially rooted in the experience of cause and effect – which is the bread and butter of common-sense reasoning. Scholars know that much work has been done on causation, and Homies only need to know that, philosophically, it is far from a sure thing that cause and effect is anything realer than our own brains projecting patterns onto natural phenomena. It is just as possible – philosophically – that we unknowingly are in a giant Hunger Games arena where the game makers control the weather and mock our meteorologists.

Setting aside the risk that we are in a simulation, let's proceed under the assumption that the connection between cause and effect is real. We would not have a world if we were not able to accumulate and apply knowledge via common-sense reasoning, and to think that there is nothing meaningful to be gained from scientific understanding is to abandon world-building altogether. However, in virtue of reason's narcissism and the brain's belief that it can find the cause for every effect, and of their very privileged life spent admiring themselves and the cosmos, ancient philosophers became overzealous. They pursued ultimate causes, causes of causes, and erroneously reasoned about otherworldly realities that they believed caused our world to appear.

Further, their minds wandered existentially – asking questions like, "What is the meaning of all this; what are we doing here and why?"– and they carried over the truth-revealing capacity

of common-sense and applied its "realness" to their thinking. They sought out an explanation for the apparent fact that humans are very distinct from, and indeed seemingly superior to, any other being on earth, and concocted an elaborate story that they were caused to be special – not by evolutionary accident – but by divine purpose. Whatever, wherever, this cosmic blueprint was, only we, as humans, could know it through our special magical minds. They believed that if they sat still enough, and contemplated hard enough, then common-sense knowledge of the blueprint would reveal itself to them by flowing from the otherworld into their minds through a cosmic mental umbilical cord. Because this idea was so meaningful, and because the story provided a means for finding knowledge that they did not, nor could ever, have, namely, the origins of life, the universe, and everything, the philosophers deemed the otherworld more Real than the realities of this world on earth. Thinking and common-sense reasoning were mixed, and the transcendental ideas of the mind became more True than the Brain's true experiences within the world.

Plato and the Bible; The Realm of the Good and God; The Birth of the Idea of Heaven[xiii]

In the last section, we identified the experiences of thinking and common-sense reasoning as two separate activities – one of the mind and one of the brain – with distinct goals. We then saw that because of reason's narcissism, ancient philosophers began to confuse thinking with common-sense reasoning and came to think that their meaningful ideas of otherworlds were as real as the knowledge they learned about this world via common-sense reasoning.

In this section, we will look at the first major, concrete manifestation of reason's narcissism (according to my story) in the ideas of the philosopher, Plato, and then see how the Romans – in

a state of desperation – took his ideas and mixed them with their religion to create the Idea of Heaven.

Homies, background knowledge that the Scholars have, but that you do not, are the historical ideas of Plato, a philosopher of ancient times living roughly 400 years prior to Jesus. Plato was the G.O.A.T. – at least the oldest and most famous as far as most academics are concerned – otherworldly thinker. Looking around his world, he sought out the cause of it, and reason's narcissism led him to imagine a world of Big Ideas beyond this one – of a realm of the perfectly Good which contained perfect Justice, perfect Truth, and perfect Beauty. There were other 'perfects' there – such as the perfect form of a chair – but these aren't as relevant here as the Big Ideas. Plato and Christianity were wed to each other roughly 300 years after Jesus died. This will make more sense as we proceed.

According to Arendt, the mind demands to find meaning within our lives; we have experiences, and in order to make sense of those experiences we think about them.[9] We are driven to think by two things – wonder and despair. Wonder is a passive experience; we are awestruck when we take in something massive or beautiful. When we have an experience that fills us with wonder, our mind plays with the memory and goes "beyond" what we've experienced to imagine bigger and better possibilities; wonder invokes the feeling of hope and is a source of inspiration in daily life. Alternatively, when we have an experience that makes us feel

[9] The phenomenon of complete thoughtlessness – of going through life without the experience of the activity of the mind – has been largely left out of this story by design. A story of thoughtlessness presupposes a story of thinking, and Arendt, herself, made the mistake of writing about thoughtlessness before she properly defined thinking. Learning from her, I am focused here solely on the experience of relatively thoughtful people, and my ideas about thoughtlessness are still under development.

powerless or afraid, our mind thinks itself away from the reality of our life entirely as a means of coping with our insecurity; despair brings on hopelessness and induces dissociation. Thinking in this vein is not passive wonder at what already is, but active escape into what is not.

While everyone rides both despairing and wonderful thought-trains throughout their lives, your lived experience in the world will likely inspire one type more frequently than the other. Plato, the main character in this section of the story, for example, was an exceptionally well-positioned man, and so his thoughts were mostly rooted in his wonder at the universe. While he did suffer the execution of his friend, Socrates, and was clearly traumatized by that, he lived an overall very blessed life, and it is no surprise that he thought that the world more 'real' than this one was just a more perfect version of the world he already knew and admired. The whole of the cosmos and the apparent harmony within it inspired Plato's thinking, and he rode those wonderful thought-trains beyond this world to one of complete perfection and stayed there to contemplate it as often as he could. In distinction, despairing thought-trains – like those we will see in the minds of the Romans – actively seek to escape the suffering of this world by seeking out another, better world. Platonic wonder pursues a place of permanence for all of life's pleasures; thoughts of despair turn away from the experiences of the senses altogether.

If you had never experienced anything like goodness and justice – which many do not – you would not marvel at the harmony of the world. You would certainly not passively come to think, despite all appearances to the contrary, that goodness and justice are more real than the disordered chaos of warring peoples and the unpredictable violence of nature; suffering does not invoke a sense of wonder, nor inspire thought-trains about perfect goodness. To the postmodern mind, this claim seems demonstrably wrong. People who suffer the most wretched lives often think themselves into the perfect realm of Heaven – every Homie has a mamaw who insists that

we must not draw conclusions from our own experiences but trust in God's Goodness – but that idea is not borne of a despairing mind. Rather, it was lended to it.[10]

Let me give you an example so you see what I mean. If you set aside all the fancy ideas you have learned in your life and recall childhood fantasies, I wonder how often you daydreamed of a scenario in which you fought and defeated some enemy? How often did you imagine that a burglar or a monster sought to attack you or your loved ones and that you, against all odds, were able to beat him in hand-to-hand combat? Maybe you had special powers; maybe you used your wit. How often were these fantasies ignited by the urge to escape your reality? Maybe it was your childhood home, or a classroom where you were unable to learn but forced to try anyway. Maybe you still rely on these thoughts in moments of boredom or when your mind begins to wander into memories that fill you with grief.

Without the supplementation of others' ideas, the mind will make use of the world you already live in. We cannot imagine a world we have never experienced whether directly or in the form of a story. In the fantasies you are unnaturally skilled, but the battle's scene is still rooted in your lived reality. If you imagined, in the darkest of times, that you would be rescued – that superman would fly into your classroom or that the Fairly Odd Parents would suddenly materialize in your bedroom – it is only because you had been provided those ideas by another. Even the most imaginative and creative authors are still confined to the experiences of this world; the most basic and fantastical ideas of superhuman strength and the ability to fly are derived from the strength and flight of other beings, which we can readily see in nature.

As an aside, note here a testimony to two threads we are chasing in this story – the claim that meaningful thinking is not concerned with what's true, and the claim that shared connection

[10] The proper term here is "lent," but I don't support it.

through world is what keeps us human. Fantasies have nothing to do with truth – no child actually expects Superman to swoop in and save them from math class – but they are a fundamental need of the mind nonetheless. Further, stories of Superman are not limited to despairing thought-trains that seek to escape from reality into fantasy, but also inspire children everywhere who admire his commitment to justice and honor. Superman doesn't have to be *real,* but that doesn't mean that we can't all try to embody his courage anyway. Without the reality of a common world – a place where we can imagine and share ideas with each other – there are corners of humanity that would never experience the wonder of ideals, and, even more disastrous, corners where people would be forever sheltered from the sufferings of their fellow humans. The interconnectedness of the world is our most essential means of hope. Now, dry your eyes Reader, back to Plato.

It is important to remember that Greek philosophers were not much concerned with the worldly affairs of the commoners; they had the luxury of focusing on the ideal way to live and did not have to dirty their hands too much with the reality of governing a populace in the way that we think of governing today. Many were teachers, and while they were "politicians" in the sense that they debated the way that their city should be organized – a city which was very small, elite and operated on an empire of slaves and other disenfranchised classes of people – they were not given assigned positions of government authority and made responsible for the lives of all Greek peoples. Politics in that sense – in the sense that we think of it today as a job and not an academic pastime – did not really arise until the Roman Empire.[xiv] It is also important to remember that Plato – despite having some ideas about the possible eternal life of the soul and ideas of some other, more perfect realm – never articulated the idea of Heaven in the way that we think of it today. It is even more important to remember that Jesus, during his lifetime, thought

that God would intervene in *this* world – not that he, himself, would go to *another* world. Heaven was *not* Jesus' idea, nor was it Plato's, but rather the lovechild of the followers of both. This unique idea of a second life after death is Roman in origin and was borne of the fearful minds of those who lived through the fall of the Roman Empire. An experience that surely seemed to be, in every sense of the phrase, the end of the world.

Early on, the Roman politicians took from the Platonic world of the Good – the home of the Big Ideas – inspiring ideals towards which they could steer their society, and the manifestation of those ideals in their political governing led to some of the greatest historical instances of systematic justice and prosperity. Later, as the success of the Roman Empire began to decline, one of the rulers, Constantine, converted the whole of the Roman world to Christianity, and thus it became common and comforting knowledge that Jesus would soon be arriving to install God's peace on Earth – effectively neutralizing the existential angst of a failing empire. However, the world continued to deteriorate, and Jesus did not return.

Arendt says that they were unable to grapple with their deteriorating reality, and so they slipped deep into despair. Remember how despair works: when thinking is rooted in unhappiness, the mind seeks to escape this world into an otherworld. Desperately searching for an escape, Roman philosophers thought up a new story of reality. Pulling from both the Bible and Plato's otherworld of Big Ideas, they reasoned that Jesus must not be coming to them here, on this earth, but rather, that they will be leaving earth to instead *go* to him. This story was powerfully meaningful, and once they had that story in mind, it became possible for them to believe that the decline of their empire was not real, nor did this world matter, for their Real home would be in the otherworld, with God, once they left this one. Thus, was born the Idea of Heaven.

Scholars, I admit that this is a woefully reductive account of Arendt's account of the fall of the Roman Empire and its influence on Christian thinking. You must remember that this is a story – merely an essay that rhetorically traces a narrative with a specific purpose in mind – and the meaning of it does not require much more than the historical basics. Homies, I recognize that in the postmodern era the story of the Romans' turning away from this world and into the land of the Idea of Heaven seems utterly absurd, pathetic even. But ask yourself not about its truth but about its meaning. It is clear that they had no common-sense grounds for reasoning about the otherworld of Heaven, but we can empathize with the need of their minds to think themselves away from such a disastrous world as a means of making sense of being trapped within it. We can ask what it would have meant to them if the Idea of Heaven was true. Is there any hope to be had when a world reaches the pinnacle of idealistic success only to fail? What comfort is there to a mind once it has been robbed of its faith in ideals? For many of us today, who are on the precipice of what seems to be – once again – the end of the world, otherworldly thinking is a tempting and human reaction to the fear that we are all alone on this god-forsaken planet.

As the Roman world devolved into the feudal one – which were indeed dark ages[xv] – thinkers turned away from this world altogether and placed all of their faith into the promised peace of the next one.[xvi] There was no meaning to be found in the happenings of daily life, only in the comfort of the Idea of Heaven – that mix of Plato's Big Ideas and the promises of the Bible. One only had to actively think oneself out of this life, then hop from that despairing thought-train to one of delusional wonder, to secure a space for hope. Any concern for the continuity of this world was lost – life on Earth was but a cosmic waiting room.[11] It was in this move, in the wake of this worldly event where reality and ideas were politically merged, that any

[11] Phrase borrowed from Maryville College professor of philosophy Dr. William Meyer.

remaining distinction between thinking and common-sense reasoning was entirely forgotten. Life in this world was no longer meaningful at all, and whatever was meaningless was not worth knowing.

The Death of Common-sense and the Rise of Scientific Truth[xvii]

In the last section, we saw how the Romans took from both Plato's Big Ideas and Christian teachings to construct the new story of the Idea of Heaven as a means of coping with their worldly despair. Unlike the Greek thinkers, who were not much concerned with the beliefs or daily lives of the commoners, Roman leaders made their story political law – all Roman citizens were Christians by decree. For the purposes of our story, this is of major relevance as the Romans imposed the confusion of thinking with common-sense reasoning on the population as a whole when they made the Idea of Heaven a government-backed fact. When the Roman Empire fell, society at large clung to the Idea of Heaven, and civilization stagnated for centuries. Medieval advancements in technology and governing – all products of common-sense reasoning – were seen as largely unnecessary and were therefore painstakingly slow.

Now, in this section, we will see the arrival of Galileo's telescope which marks the end of the feudal age, according to this story, because it was seen as the first time a man-made tool revealed a secret of the universe. Until then, it was believed that knowledge of the cosmos could only be revealed to the mind through the cosmic umbilical cord; that is, through divine revelation or philosophical contemplation. As the political authority in the medieval world, the Catholic Church – recognizing the immense threat that modern science posed to their power – labeled Galileo blasphemous and condemned him to house arrest to live out his final years. For this reason, Arendt – and so we will as well – defined the telescope as the pivotal moment that

the medieval church lost its supreme influence, and we officially entered the modern era. We will see how the philosophers handled the revelations of the telescope – spoiler, Readers, they did not handle it well. We often look back on the arrival of modern science as the moment in history where we became "reasonable" and returned to the reality of the world, but we will see, in fact, that philosophy overcorrected and further confused the distinction between thinking and common-sense reasoning.

If life is but a cosmic waiting room, what does that mean to our minds? If we already know what all of life means – if we know that it's just a temporary blip before we go to paradise – then do we really still think? Not exactly, instead, we contemplate. Contemplation is not the same as thinking, though we often have to think about an idea before we can come to contemplate it. Thinking is a train – it actively travels through your memories and ideas to imagine other possibilities and draw new conclusions. Contemplation is a sort of destination. Instead of traveling, your mind rests and passively loves on one idea.

An example that all Homies can relate to – and perhaps you too Scholars – is the contemplation of a 'perfect' relationship. How often has a lover proved to you – made explicit to your common-sense – that they are not worthy of your loyalty? Their actions contradict their words, or their words are cruel. Their behavior towards you is loveless, and your love for them is senseless. What is one to do? Leave? Sometimes, but not usually. Rather, you first, despair, then think through their actions and search out any breadcrumbs of kindness – like that one time when they looked over at you with slight remorse after having just degraded your dignity. You leave behind the parts that hurt and cling to the parts that soothe, and eventually, you find the idea of them that is meaningful – likely some variation of a work-in-progress who will one day provide a

return on your investment – and you hold that image in your mind at all times. We see romantic contemplation in movies all the time – Amy in *Gone Girl*, Anna in *Frozen*, Sansa in *Game of Thrones*, every conversation from *Sex and the City*, and the Bennet sisters in *Pride and Prejudice*.

As an aside, healthily *thinking* about your doomed relationship involves first a proper distinction between common-sense reasoning and thinking, which society has conditioned us against – especially in romantic relationships. People who cannot understand why their loved one stays with an abusive partner often say something like, "it's just plain common-sense," and they are not wrong, but we have seen in this story how easily common-sense can be overpowered by the mind; indeed, in many cases, individuals can become so conditioned to abuse and so mentally trapped in dissociative and/or contemplative states that they no longer "feel" their suffering and consequently lose the ability to use their common-sense to reason that their partner is bad for them. But the rejection of common-sense in dating is not limited to cases of abuse – most contemporary narratives of courtship employ fantastical thinking. The phenomenon of "butterflies" – strong feelings of anxiety when thinking about or engaging with a new potential partner – is a physical sign of unease and discomfort, yet we are conditioned to see it as a sure sign of relationship potential. No doubt because women for centuries were sold to men that they did not know, or did not like, and, in efforts to comfort them, older women told them that their common-sensical terror was actually a sign of love.

Truly thinking through bad relationships doesn't happen often. When it does occur, the resulting breakups often look – from the outside – to be sudden and rash, as if one day the person just *snapped*. And, in a way, they did; when you're driven to reason about your common-sense experiences with a less-than-perfect lover – about the fact that you are always anxious, or

lethargic, or god-forbid, icked – because your mental power of delusion has failed you, the truth becomes undeniable; when you know – *you know*. Once your unhappiness becomes a fact – once it is a truth that you have learned from your common-sense reasoning, then you can *think about what it means* to you that you do not enjoy your relationship. You might think to yourself, "What does my life look like if I stay in a loveless relationship? Do I really want to spend my life trying to convince myself that this is enough? Wouldn't it be wonderful if I met someone who made me feel special and safe?" The answer to this line of thinking, Homies, is always – GTFO.

You may now be thinking, Readers, of countless loved ones you have known who have failed to leave a bad lover despite knowing the truth. I, myself, have spent nearly a decade attempting to discern how and why some people leave and others don't. Deciding to leave a toxic relationship is rare, and the conditions that facilitate such seemingly sudden and explosive displays of personal will are elusive; I have tried to articulate them elsewhere, but after many years I have resigned myself to the leading theory laid out by the Eurythmics – "some of them want to be abused" – who am I to disagree? Movin' on – back to the Dark Ages.[12]

We will skip the philosophical history of the medieval age with the exception of noting that philosophy became, almost exclusively, religious, meaning that all thinking was a means to contemplating the reality of the Idea of Heaven. Medieval philosophy is not much different than contemplating a perfect relationship. Thinkers pilfered through religious texts, found ways to supplement nonsense with more thinking, and held fast to the Truth of their stories. While the

[12] See again Maryville College's article on my – now, when reflected upon as a master's candidate, unconvincing – attempt to use Martha Nussbaum's account of the emotions to make sense of the sudden victories of common-sense over delusion as well as my methodology of using music to illuminate what cannot be adequately explained in philosophical language. https://www.maryvillecollege.edu/news/2023/self-discovery-leads-to-maryville-college-alumnas-senior-study/

initial thinking requires effort, once the idea has been solidified it is surprisingly simple to pull it up and contemplate it whenever you need – whenever your common-sense tries to break through. For nearly a millennium, this worked for European Christian philosophers. The experience of true suffering and a lack of worldly meaning could be readily compensated for with the Truth of Heavenly contemplation. All that was to be done was to sit very still and focus your mind on the cosmic umbilical cord. That was, until Galileo's telescope.

We are so far removed from the pre-modern world that we forget how self-evident it is to the senses that the sun seemingly orbits the Earth. Put aside your knowledge of the solar system and just think about the fact that, every single day since the beginning of time, the sun has appeared to come up on one side of the Earth and gone back down the other. While there were early signs that we might have had it wrong – such as the mathematical complexity required to make sense of the stars' movements around our supposedly stationary planet – it was an entirely different and disorienting experience to look through Galileo's device and see that we, in fact, orbit the sun. Just as it is one thing to recognize that it does not take your lover an hour to commute home from work, but it is an entirely other thing to see them kissing someone else in their work parking lot. Theoretical possibilities are easy to ignore – what you *see* is not.

The event of the telescope – when viewed in hindsight – is often characterized as a great and wondrous achievement in human history. While that is true, in a sense, it was met by the early modern philosophers with – you guessed it – despair. Whatever amount of fear they had that the Idea of Heaven might be a farce paled in comparison to the existential anguish of realizing that they were incorrect about their most basic understandings of the universe. How could they presume to know the nature of God if they had been so wrong, for so long, about the

movement of the sun? It became very clear to them that they knew much less than they had previously thought, and their faith in their ability to know *anything* was thrown into doubt.

Scholars know that I am leading us into the thinking of the early modern philosopher Descartes, whose philosophical moves are well known and too heady for a full recounting here, and so I must ask you, Scholars, to resign yourself to the endnotes for a justification of the criminally and increasingly reductive story I am telling here. Homies, it is not especially important to understand all the ways Descartes thought about the revelations of the Telescope. What it *meant* to him can be grasped by simply recalling the earlier example of being – unknowingly – stuck in a Hunger Games arena, or you may recall the experience of the unknowing cog in the cinematic world of the Matrix.

Remember in the Hunger Games when Katniss learns to spot the shimmer of the arena's ceiling – a glitch in the matrix – and shoots an arrow through it to disable the illusion. Now, we know that Katniss was aware that she was in the arena; she knew that the world she was in was not the real world. But imagine that she had no idea. Having been born in the arena she assumed that the nature of her world was as authentic and true as any world. Suppose that she is out one day hunting with her bow and sees the glimmer at the edge of the trees. After days of repeatedly seeing the glimmer in the same place at any time of day, she decides to shoot an arrow through it. When the arrow pierces the ceiling's weak spot the illusion is dispelled, and she sees that what she thought was the whole of her world is in fact just an empty and cold warehouse.

The telescope was humanity's arrow, and the illusion of the sun's relation to the Earth – the reality that we thought we knew so well – was dispelled. Descartes – and we can assume that the unaware version of Katniss would as well – was devastated by the realization of being so deeply deceived by his common-sense, and he instantly set out to determine ways of reasoning in

which we could regain any certain means of knowing our world. Just as we can imagine that Katniss would begin to suspiciously investigate the arena – overturning every stone and peeling back every blade of grass – so Descartes began to inspect the inner workings of his brain. He not only doubted the existence of his world, he began to doubt the existence of himself.

In his experience of radical doubting, Descartes came to the universally famous conclusion "I think, therefore I am," except that what he meant by 'thinking' was really doubting – "I doubt, therefore I am." For as long as he was actively doubting his common-sense, Descartes was sure that he *was.* The inner experience of his brain's calculations – of suspicion-induced deduction – was all that he was sure existed, and so Descartes shifted away from common-sense experiences as a meaningful way of knowing the world and turned instead to the processes of highly theoretical reasoning, namely, mathematics. It was no longer reasonable to accumulate knowledge of the world through mere common-sense, one had to also be able to prove every claim about reality through theoretical calculation. Sitting still in passive contemplation of the Idea of Heaven became the most meaningless and useless path to knowing the world, as Arendt puts it, "In order to be certain one had to *make* sure, and in order to know one had to do."[xviii] From here on, to know, one first had to doubt, investigate, and prove to oneself the validity of a claim through logical deduction alone.

This was the birth of modern science, and indeed the start of the pursuit of the scientific enterprise as we still know it today. In one way, science partially corrected philosophy's failure to separate meaningful stories from claims about truth; faith in the truth-revealing capacity of the cosmic umbilical cord was broken by the revelations of the telescope, and thus Descartes' philosophy remedied the erroneous influence of thinking on reasoning – but he sacrificed common-sense in the process. Knowledge of the world accumulated with the senses was now

regarded with suspicion – it was our senses, after all, that led us to believe that the sun orbited the Earth – and now only after a claim had been subjected to the processes of rigorous scientific experimentation could we be certain that it was true. Geometry's Cartesian plane – named after Descartes – for example, is a "proof" of the reality of the triangle independent of any experience with an actual, physical, triangle. So while it may seem that modern science is a return to the reality of this world, it is still but another, more logical, form of otherworldly thinking; whatever is seemingly true to the senses, namely, nature as we experience it, is merely the visual side effect of the other, more Real – thus in its own way still otherworldly – invisible processes of Scientific Truth.

The worldly consequence of science's transition from common-sense reasoning to theoretical reasoning as a means of finding truth is difficult to see at first. One example I find especially illuminating is the experience of checking the weather. So often, our weather apps tell us that there will be no rain today, but our common-sense – looking at the gray sky and feeling the strong wind – signals rain. How often, Readers, have you left your umbrella at home, been caught in the rain, and cursed the weather app because you just *knew* it looked like rain? If you knew it was going to rain, why didn't you bring your umbrella? You didn't bring it, because you have been conditioned to believe in theoretical reason over and above your common-sense; only the meteorologist – the theoretical scientist – can make true claims about the weather.

Perhaps I have not convinced you yet, so let's consider an alternative example – this time the meteorologist claims that it is snowing, but you see no snow. This happened recently when the entirety of the southern US was hit by a winter storm. When the storm hit, the weather stations claimed that such and such region received some x amount of snow, but when residents of that region went to look outside their windows, there was markedly less snow on the ground

than the weatherman had said there would be. This prompted outrage amongst communities that had prepared – whether in excitement or fear – for the forecasted blizzard. News agencies across the region released stories on what is known as virga – the phenomenon where precipitation evaporates in the layer of dry air some thousands of feet above our heads. "The radar isn't lying," says the National Weather Service, "the rain or snow is not hitting the ground."[xix] Now you tell me, Readers, if we never see a single flake, is it really true that it snowed? Common-sense says no; Scientific Truth says yes.

Not only did Descartes diminish our capacity to reason about the world by degrading common-sense, but his mathematical philosophy of the processes behind Scientific Truth dismisses the value of imaginative thinking altogether. Modern thinking – the way we still do it – has become increasingly reasonable; the mind has been reduced to a mere tool for the brain. Today, only what is Scientifically True is meaningful; the equation of thinking and reasoning lives on with newly imposed limitations on what we can think. Nowhere is the contemporary manifestation of this compulsion clearer than in the popular and insulting – and indeed fallacious – question, "Are you religious or do you believe in science?" For whatever value modern science provides the world, it does not provide us much meaning in daily life; suffering does not lend itself to tidy mathematical formulas – or does it?

The Idea of Progress and the Rise of the Social Sciences

In the last section, we saw that the medieval philosopher Descartes responded to the realization that the Bible's claims about nature were false with a radical despair – effectively withdrawing from the world altogether to reside, instead, inside the safety of his brain and its puzzles.



Figure 2: SpongeBob Indoors

Descartes did not correct the erroneous influence of reason's narcissism in philosophy – he did not remedy the philosophical tradition's systemic confusion of the mind's need to think with the brain's need to reason – but instead crowned theoretical reason as the ruler over thinking once and for all. The worldly result was twofold: common-sense was diminished and so deductive reasoning became the only reputable way of finding truth, and the meaningful stories of God and the Idea of Heaven – and the value of the mind's stories in general – were existentially threatened by science's self-aggrandizement.

In this section, we will see three distinct attempts to remedy the existential threat that the arrival of modern science posed to religion. We will begin first with the philosopher Immanuel Kant, whose philosophy can best be summed up by the line, "have your cake, and eat it too."[xx]

If you have seen "The Good Place," you will recognize Kant's name. He is the most famous thinker, indeed the king, of modern philosophy. King Kant was one of the leading philosophers of the "Enlightenment" movement – the modern world's cultural shift away from superstition and blind faith towards reasonable and scientific thinking. However, this shift

immediately endangered the Idea of Heaven – one of our tradition's most meaningful stories. One could always have faith, but faith plagued by doubt does not provide enough hope to endure the hardships of life. Grappling with the serious religious implications of modern doubt, King Kant's solution was to suggest that we keep Plato's Big Ideas as beliefs for the mind and separate them from the obviously false scientific claims of the Bible. He thought it was fine, indeed reasonable, to still believe the stories, but that we needed to accept that we could never know *for certain* in this life the truth of God and should therefore separate thinking religiously from reasoning scientifically.

An authentic and truly great thinker, Kant knew that we did not have the scientific grounds to claim that the Idea of Heaven was true – he knew it was not a scientifically reasonable claim. However, despite the fact that he said that we could never know the reality of the Big Ideas, God, and the Idea of Heaven, Kant insisted that we must *assume* them. Essentially, Kant advocated for a sophisticated level of religious cognitive dissonance as a means of keeping faith without offending reason. Now, many philosophers – perhaps the scholars reading this story – would be ready to throw hands with me over this statement; they insist that Kant proved his theory and that there is no tension in saying that we should believe to be true that which is fundamentally unknowable. True, Kant wrote an exhaustive theory in which he "proved" – using philosophical arguments but not real-world evidence like in science – that we are reasonably entitled to believe in the truth of those stories which originally were given to us via the cosmic umbilical cord. But whatever theoretical grounds they have for their position – whatever theoretical grounds Kant, himself, had – in the common world Kant, and the philosophers following him, are overtly wrong. This is true even if the philosophers are right that Kant succeeded philosophically.

Philosophers like Kant cling to this framework in spite of its failure to be meaningful to the common mind for one of two reasons: either they, one, require the theoretical permission to authentically hold onto their faith, or, two, they believe it has practical, worldly value. Kantian philosophers may think that the commoners cannot be persuaded to strive for the ideals of goodness and justice if they do not ultimately believe in a heavenly reward that will offset the ubiquitous experience of suffering in life. This line of thinking goes, in so many words, that the world will never be perfect, but that we have to try anyway, and that we'll never know if Heaven is Real, but we have to believe it all the same, because who could reasonably pursue a moral life in a morally depraved world without it?

There is absolutely a painful and exhausting mental burden that comes with holding these contradictory beliefs. The denial of that dissonance is – to me – philosophically criminal.

Homies, the demand to hold onto this contradiction may seem like no great challenge to you, but that is because Kant's dissonance is so deeply ingrained in modern psychologies. We are conditioned in our society to read about Genesis on Sunday, then look through the telescope in science class on Monday. We are meant to keep the faith at church and stick to what we know at school. In *theory* this is an excellent skill. No doubt, some people in the world hold faith and knowledge as two separate mental experiences without much difficulty. But, for many in the common world, where the sufferings of daily life constantly threaten to overwhelm our ability to meaningfully navigate within it, the habitual switching from religious thinking to scientific reasoning induces a low-grade psychological ache. What is ideal in theory is practically exhausting, and individuals take shortcuts by allowing the thoughts of the mind and the knowledge of the brain to permeate – sacrificing the very distinction that Kant advocated for so earnestly.

Not only does Kant's solution to science's threat to religion require philosophical education on the distinction itself, but it presupposes a world where only one religion is reasonably believable. Kant, himself, lived in a thoroughly Christian society; assuming the truth of the only religion in town is easy enough – assuming the truth of one religion out of many is asking too much. Indeed, to demand that we must believe in the Idea of Heaven without scientific proof is brave; to demand that we must believe in the Idea of Heaven over and above the various other well-known theories of an afterlife is painfully audacious. In the postmodern era the Kantian dissonance is untenable. Now, Homies, you might be thinking something like, "Well, maybe I don't believe in the Christian God, but I believe that there is some higher power that is ultimately Good," and I would say, "Ah, welcome to philosophy, please see Plato's cosmic glue." The postmodern urge to retreat from identifying as a believer of one religion or another while still maintaining an absolute belief in the truth of the idea of God or of ultimate Goodness is the philosophical attempt that Kant, himself, made, and his dissonance runs deep.

Kant's demand to separate religious and scientific beliefs is the philosophical ancestor of the distinction that I have been advocating for throughout this story. Indeed, Arendt wrote that Kant was the first to recognize the distinct experiences of the mind's need to think and the brain's need to reason – whereas earlier philosophers continuously confused the two – but he failed to see that religious thinking is but *one* manifestation of meaningful storytelling; Kant was unwilling – or unable – to let go of the traditional stories of the cosmic umbilical cord – ideas about supreme goodness or a singular higher power – and his influence still spreads unchecked today. But thinking is not limited to religious or philosophical thought-trains; the mind makes stories of many kinds.

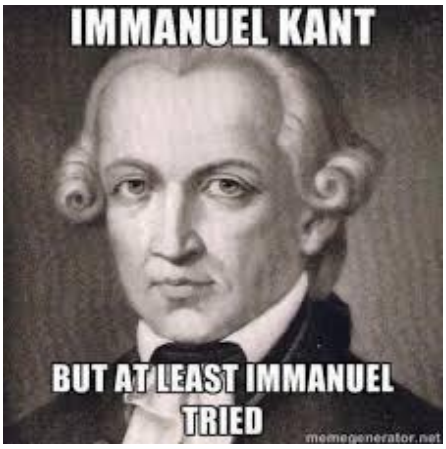


Figure 3: Immanuel Kant

Now, a shift. We have seen King Kant's solution, but honestly – who has the time for that kind of mental gymnastics? Only mental gymnasts, namely, philosophers. Now, we will see Georg Hegel's solution to modern religious doubt – best summarized as, "Have faith."[xxi]

With "religion being for the many and philosophy only for the few,"[xxii] the philosopher, Hegel, recognized immediately the consequences of Kant's thinking. Philosophers have the necessary time and education to hold the distinction between faith and knowledge without the overwhelming distress of dissonance – society at large does not. Fearing for the mass loss of faith in the power of Goodness within this world, and also deeply devoted to his faith in Christianity, Hegel sought to find a new solution to modern doubt that reasonably explained our apparent lack of access to knowledge of the Big Ideas, God, and the Idea of Heaven. Scholars, if you are lovers of Hegel, please brace yourselves. Homies, Hegel's solution is the Idea of Progress; and the widespread influence of his philosophy is the reason why your mamaw cannot accept that the world is unwell, constantly reminds you that it used to be much worse, and insists that you just need to have faith. If Kant was the king of modern philosophy, Hegel was the usurper.

After Descartes reduced all meaningful forms of reasoning to theoretical processes, the role of 'process,' itself, became very philosophically interesting. Theoretical reasoning was a process of logical deduction and mathematical calculation, and that same process seemed to accurately map onto the study of nature in the Truth of Science; we could only be sure that we knew something with certainty after it had been subjected to scientific processes. Hegel, a truly great historian, sought to apply the notion of process to history itself. Looking back, it did seem to be – from his privileged position – that the world was becoming increasingly more Just and Good. Rebelling against Kant's distinction between faith and knowledge, Hegel set to work on a new story.

He took the Idea of Heaven and broke it back down into its two roots: Plato's Big Ideas and the biblical claim that Jesus would return to install God's peace on Earth. He took the idea of God and redefined it; God was not some old man in the sky, but divine Reason. Reason, formerly known as God, became the logical cosmic glue that connected Plato's world of Big Ideas to this world on Earth, and history was the slow, but sure, process of the merging of the two. Unlike Plato's cosmic umbilical cord, Hegel's cosmic cord did not individually connect the otherworld of the Big Ideas to each of our contemplative minds, but necessarily linked the otherworld of Reason to our historical, collective world on earth – one, big, world-to-world, umbilical cord; Hegel's cosmic cord was not meant to transmit Truth from the divine world into the human mind as Plato's was, but instead allowed for the transmission of Reason (God's spirit) into society as a whole. However, similar to Plato's story of passive contemplation of the cosmic umbilical cord, the transmission of Reason into this world is passive – it is happening quite independently of anything we do. According to Hegel, we should all just go about our business and let Reason do its thing.

Thus, was born the Idea of Progress; the world may *appear* to be a place of senseless suffering, and God *seems* to have abandoned us, but if you see how far we've come, you will see that – in due process – we are witnessing the unfolding of Heaven on Earth; it can *only* get better. By applying the notion of process to history, Hegel carried over the otherworldliness of the philosophy behind Scientific Truth and, once again, denied the reality of the world as it appears to our common-sense and claimed to have found knowledge just from thinking. The Idea of Progress is more subtle than the Idea of Heaven; the True world is not a different *place*; it is a different *time* – the utopian future. Followers of Hegelian philosophy need not concern themselves with their lived realities, today, but rest easy knowing that there will be a better world tomorrow.

Suppose we take it for granted that the Idea of Progress is True. What does it *mean* to us? It means that all suffering in our world is ultimately for the greater good; it means that suffering itself is meaningful. And it also means that even though you will likely not live long enough to see any true, meaningful progress in the world yourself, that doesn't make it any less True. But the problem is that cognitive dissonance is as much a result of Hegel's philosophy as it is of Kant's. How many of us have watched as our elders comfort themselves with this story – tell themselves that "it was meant to be" – when we *know* that can't possibly be true. Homies, how often have you heard your mamaw tell herself, "Everything happens for a reason," in the wake of a true tragedy? It is because of Hegel's Reason.

Of all the philosophical thoughts masquerading as knowledge in this story, Hegel's is the most absurd; to the postmodern mind – in the reflective experience of those under forty – the Idea of Progress is rage-bait. The Boomers said democracy always wins; the textbooks said America was the land of the free; the courts said women were people too, and so on. The fallout

of the postmodern generation's despair in witnessing the real time collapse of worldly progress – and thus the rejection of the Idea of Progress – while watching still as our elders cling to it, even now, in the wake of its obvious untruth – has only just begun to reveal itself.



Figure 4: Hegel

Homies, you should now have a better understanding of how philosophy has influenced the way you think about higher meaning, and now you will begin to see how it has influenced the way scientists have objectified you.

Scholars, you will soon begin to see how this historical thread of philosophical thinking bears on the phenomenon of scrolling.

A final shift, if you will, Readers. So far in this section we have seen two philosophical attempts to remedy the crisis in religion that resulted from the rise of modern science: Kant's dissonant demand to believe that which you know to be impossible to prove, and Hegel's equally dissonant suggestion to believe that your suffering is all a meaningful part of the Progress of Reason (still known by many to be "God's Plan"). Now, we will turn to one final stage in this grand trajectory in which science started taking on questions and roles which – unintentionally – placed it in the role that was previously held by religion. Religion seeks to explain the experience

of senseless suffering in life, and with the advent of the social sciences, science moved to answer that too.[xxiii]

Once the Idea of Progress had fully taken root in the world, other fields of social inquiry adopted the process logic, which is, recall, the Hegelian idea that we are inevitably getting closer to a better understanding of the truth. One important manifestation of this was the way that scientific optimism – the movement which held that advancements in science and technology could solve all of the world's problems – exploded in the modern era. With the rise of statistical research – the method of gathering massive amounts of data and deducing conclusions from that data – branches of cultural study began to shear off of the philosophical discipline to pursue knowledge in a more scientific way. These fields are what are now known as the social sciences – disciplines grounded in statistics such as sociology, political science, and psychology. Social sciences *seek* to explain all of human behavior using theoretical reason as opposed to common-sense reasoning and consider themselves to be successful to the extent that they accomplish that. These scientists *attempt* to explain and describe the meaning of the happenings of daily life using only the tools of theoretical reasoning – not common-sense.

In reality, statistical reasoning – what the social scientists use – is not theoretical reasoning at all, but it is instead a return to common-sense reasoning. To be sure, statistical reasoning relies on theoretical models and tools, but let me explain. There is an important distinction between the social sciences, those like psychology, and the natural sciences, such as those that study the forces of physics. To illustrate this distinction in the context of physics, consider the example of "knowing" the truth of gravity. We can test gravity over and over and over again, and, every single time, the object will fall towards the Earth, and we can devise

comprehensive theories of physics to explain gravity. Now, does the recognition of gravity, itself, require theoretical reasoning for us to know that it is *true*? No. Common-sense reasoning tells us that an object will always fall towards the Earth. We can know that gravity governs nature from direct experience – we don't need science to tell us that. On the other hand, we use theoretical reasoning – mathematics – to extrapolate from our common-sense experiences with gravity. The perfect replicability of gravity's experiments has enabled us to deduce a mathematical formula for gravitational force – and we can use it anytime, anywhere to predict the certain speed of an object's fall to the ground on the basis of that object's weight and its distance from the Earth's surface. So, common-sense reasoning tells us that we live in a world in which nature is governed by gravity, and theoretical reasoning allows us to develop a physical theory of the natural world at large – including things like the law of gravity.

What changes when we move from the natural sciences to the social sciences? For one thing, theories about human behavior – extrapolated from the recorded data of individuals' lives – cannot be repeatedly tested in the certain way that natural forces can; human data collection can never be as comprehensive and precise as observations about the laws of nature. It is true that we can study how humans have tended to behave under some set of conditions by gathering and organizing enough data points, and collected data can indeed be an incredibly valuable tool for assessing the health of a population and the adequacy of their world. If statisticians showed, for example, that counties without pre-school programs report lower kindergarten literacy rates than other counties that do provide pre-school, then politicians, parents, and educators might reasonably allocate taxes for pre-school programs in their own districts.

Often, the social sciences use their statistical research to make mass projections – asserting what look like laws of human behavior. This happens when the social scientists begin

to assert that under such and such conditions an individual is *likely* to behave a certain way. Such as how certain demographics will vote, or the likeliness of a child born into poverty moving into middle class in adulthood. When social scientists model projections on the basis of statistical data, they are engaging in common-sense reasoning. We use our common-sense – the silent, internal connection between all of our five senses – to observe phenomena in the world. Statistical reasoning is merely an expansion of that ability – observations are collected and recorded by multiple people. That observational data is then consolidated and analyzed, and conclusions can be drawn. Statistical data tracking is just a massive and concerted effort of individuals' common-sense reasoning.

Despite the fact that statistical projections are rooted in common-sense reasoning – meaning that they do not meet the standards of the theoretical reasonings of natural science, that is, their truth claims cannot be tested and retested in any sense of the traditional scientific method – they are frequently communicated to the common mind as if they are as true as Descartes' Scientific Truth. When social scientists present statistical projections to the common mind as a justification for certain worldly decisions, they are posturing as if they are working within the authority of a theory – as if they are doing natural science. It *seems* like they are making theoretical predications – like those made by physicists – when, really, they are merely providing a description of a probability within a population that can be discussed under the assumption that all people in similar data sets will operate the same way.

For example, the use of standardized testing scores as an indication of academic potential. Homies, have you or anyone you know been personally victimized by standardized testing? Assessments like the ACT and the SAT are used to predict the future success of individual test-takers once they get to college. An individual who scores below an 18 in English

and a 19 in math on the ACT is not permitted to attend local community college upon graduation from high school under the assumption that they cannot keep up with the material.[xxiv] The student who scores lowly on the ACT because of hunger or chaos in their home – or because of common testing anxiety – is marked as *likely* too ignorant to attend higher education. In reality, it is just as likely that, if judged by an alternative assessment under different conditions, that same student would be predicted to thrive in a college setting and excel at academics.

Why does this matter? For two reasons. One, it matters in our daily lives because these probability descriptions are received by the common mind *as if* they are as likely to be true as the predictions of physics – and social scientists, themselves, sometimes slip into this language and mentality. There are practical, worldly consequences that results from that drift between conceptual frameworks. I, personally, know of many intelligent individuals who gave up on education in the wake of scoring lowly on standardized tests. Even if the social scientists, themselves, don't confuse their statistical projections with law-like theories, the common mind perceives the social theories as if they are laws of nature structurally similar to the law of gravity. Individuals then feel that their lives are limited by the norms of social theory, and even if that limitation is in some ways for the better, the limitation is based on an incorrect understanding of science.

The second reason that the worldly presentation of social science as structurally similar to natural science matters is because here, we see, yet again, another point in this story when reason's narcissism imagines itself capable of finding the absolute answer to life, the universe, and everything. The objectivity of the social sciences is exaggerated, specifically when they are applied to explaining and describing individuals. The social scientist's brain recognizes patterns in individuals who endure more or less similar experiences and imagines that there must be some

absolutely True pattern underlying all of human behavior – to the end of prescribing the world a blueprint for social and psychological health; the theoretical blueprints of social science are but another manifestation of otherworldly thinking.



Figure 5: Social Science in Daily Life

Arendt's concern was this: "The trouble with modern theories of behaviorism is not that they are wrong but that they could become true, that they actually are the best possible conceptualization of certain obvious trends in modern society."[xxv] Throughout this section I have tried to illuminate the manifestation of her prescient observations – documented seventy years ago – in our society today. The more that the social sciences align themselves with natural science, the more that people believe that their lives are wholly determined by social theories with the same conviction that their bodies are determined by gravity to stay on the earth.

Let's pause now to tidy our thinking, as this is the end of Part One and the conclusion of the Homies' instruction.

I have been claiming throughout this story that telling meaningful stories and learning the truth about the world are two separate experiences, two distinct internal activities – one is the mind's experience of thinking about life and the other is the brain's experience of using common-sense reasoning to navigate the world – and that those experiences are constantly being confused and conflated. I have been mapping that argument by drawing on the history of worldlessness and the philosophical urge to think beyond our world and away from it as laid out in the work of Hannah Arendt. We have seen the ancient ideas of otherworlds that are supposedly linked to our minds via a cosmic umbilical cord, namely, Plato's world of Big Ideas; we saw the Roman and Medieval story of the Idea of Heaven – a combination of Plato's philosophy and the Christian Bible stories – then we saw the Bible's scientific claims defeated by the telescope and the rise of Descartes's Scientific Truth. We saw Kant attempt to separate religion and science as two distinct belief systems, only for Hegel to mix them back together in the Idea of Progress. Then, we saw how the statisticians – under the pressure to be modern and scientific – began to conduct large-scale, common-sense research of human behavior and the common mind's adoption of those theories as if they are as certainly true as the Scientifically True theories of the physical sciences.

All of the theories in this story claim to know the invisible Truth that causes the truths of this world, and all of them attempt to discern the meaning of the apparently random and senseless happenings of daily life.

I have also claimed that the philosophically systematic equation of thinking and reasoning has contributed to the widespread decline of our ability to do either, and that is where our story begins to turn now. Homies, you done real good work here. Time to sit back.



Figure 6: SpongeBob and Patrick Relax

Part Two[xxvi]

The Inevitable Rise of Science-Denialism in Our World

Greetings, Scholars. I imagine you are quite ready for me to explain myself. I assume that you understood what I was up to until I accused the social sciences of scientific blasphemy, and now I have perhaps lost some of your trust – hopefully I can win it back. That was in fact the place that I began to take the reins from Hannah Arendt. While Arendt had a certain disdain for the social sciences, her complaint was largely theoretical whereas mine is practical, and you can see in the last section where I began to build off of her theoretical criticisms and turn towards the worldly implications for the common mind. While in Part One I stayed within the boundaries of Arendtian authority – albeit with a healthy hyperbolic flare – in Part Two I go beyond what Arendt, herself, claimed. I still draw on her thinking, but unless she is explicitly referenced, these claims should be read as my own.

In this section, as an attempt to justify and expand on my thinking, I will move away from the historical narrative and shift to an existential one. I will attempt to illuminate the experience of science in daily, common, life – that is in the minds of the homies and postmodern minds in general – and claim that science does not, nor could ever, provide the world a source of meaning in the way that religion once did. In total defiance of this existential reality, modern society presents science as a hopeful and deeply meaningful enterprise, and thus induces the same low-grade ache of cognitive dissonance as Kantian and Hegelian philosophy.

There is a methodological problem with this argument because this conversation is no longer taking place in worldly discourse – it is taking place in digital spaces via memes. For example, you may currently have a burning desire, Scholars, to debate with me the legitimacy of

the social sciences; you may be chomping at the bit to question me on my thinking and are eager to request a detailed accounting of my justifications. At the minimum, I am sure that you would like to invite me to engage in discourse about my estimation of statistical reasoning. In the postmodern era, however, expecting to talk it out is considered quite dramatic and unnecessary. Your position could be quickly relayed by sharing a meme – such as seen in ***Exhibit A****.*

Exhibit A:

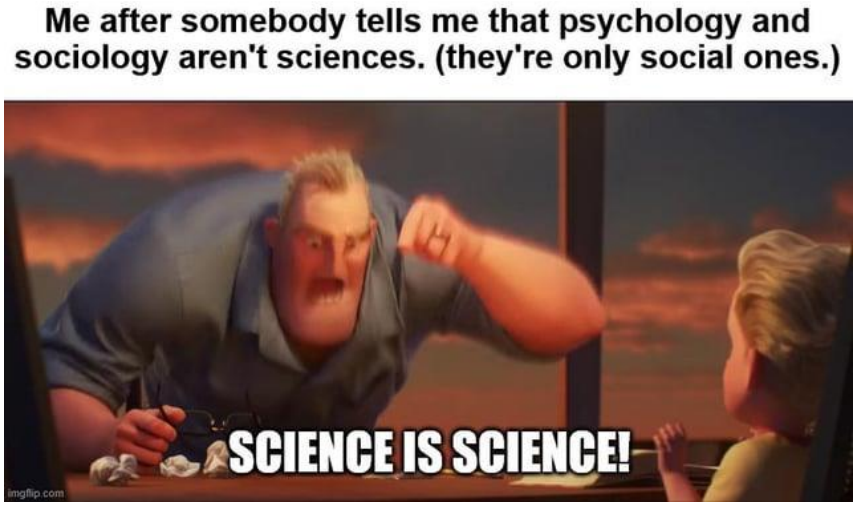


Figure 7: Angry Mr. Incredible

I might then respond with another meme, such as seen in ***Exhibit B****.*

Exhibit B:

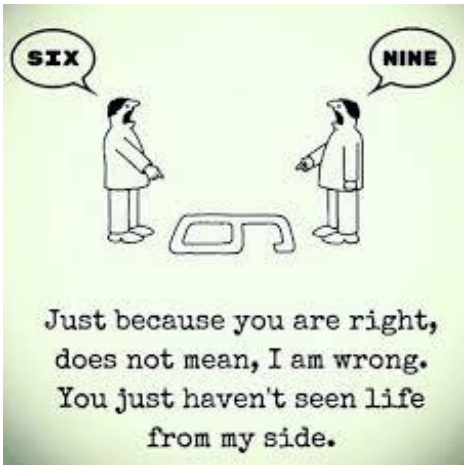


Figure 8: Perspective Matters

As we move through the following section, I will make my point traditionally – that is, by using linguistically structured thought – and then provide a meme that demonstrates the manifestation of that thought in the common mind. Let us begin.

To the postmodern, non-philosophical mind – in the minds of the homies and myself –the propagation of philosophical Truth as we have seen it so far fails on two fronts. First, it is clear that stories of Truth never stay true for long – what is truth anyway? Plato's True world of Big Ideas did not survive the chaotic and disharmonious decline of the Greek and Roman empires. The Truth of the Idea of Heaven collapsed under the false scientific truths of the Bible. Hegel's Idea of Progress is so divorced from the truths of experience that its claim to Truth has always been absurdly entitled – as seen in **Exhibit C**. One society in one corner of the world may appear to be becoming increasingly heavenly, but the world as a whole has never shown such progress; Hegel's insistence that the world will *only* become more Good and Just is demonstrably wrong. The world is – as it has always more or less been – a place where the]power of ideals wax and wane, and suffering is ever-present. This is clear to the postmodern mind.

Exhibit C: 

Figure 9: LOL Hegel

The modern story of Truth, the Truth of Science, distinguishes itself from these earlier, "unreasonable" stories and therefore demands the studious attention and reverence of the common mind – but is Scientific Truth any more believable than the platonic Big Ideas? After all there is no guarantee that math is *Truly* written into the fabric of space. Arendt, quoting Leibniz, argues, "For if 'it can be shown that a mathematical web of some kind can be woven about any universe containing several objects . . . then the fact that our universe lends itself to mathematical treatment is not a fact of any great philosophic significance.'" The physicist cannot use physics to defend the Truth of Science against the claim that mathematics is merely the projection of the brain's patterns onto entirely random natural phenomena – they would have to use philosophy – as seen in **Exhibit D**. Why then should people trust the physicist's story any more than they trust Plato's?

Exhibit D:



Figure 10: All Hail Plato

Sure enough – they don't; science denialism is rampant in the common world. And the frequently repeated claim that science denialism is internet-induced and a result of partisan politics, meaning that it developed relatively recently – as seen in **Exhibit E** – is but wishful thinking. While science denialism became much more visibly acute during the Covid pandemic

and resulting culture wars, it has been spreading for centuries. From the Scopes Monkey Trials to the rise of the Flat Earth conspiracy theory, the common mind continuously rejects the claims of modern science.

Exhibit E:



Figure 11: Science Denialism

All too often, thinkers discuss the common distrust of the physical sciences as if it is an epistemic crisis (Homies, remember that this means a crisis in knowing) – as seen in **Exhibit F.** This conversation generally leads to the consensus that more education will bring the commoners back into the fold of reason. But education is not the deus ex machina of this story; *nobody cares* that the mitochondria is the powerhouse of the cell. What is going on in the common mind cannot be remedied by a greater understanding of the methodologies of the various sciences.

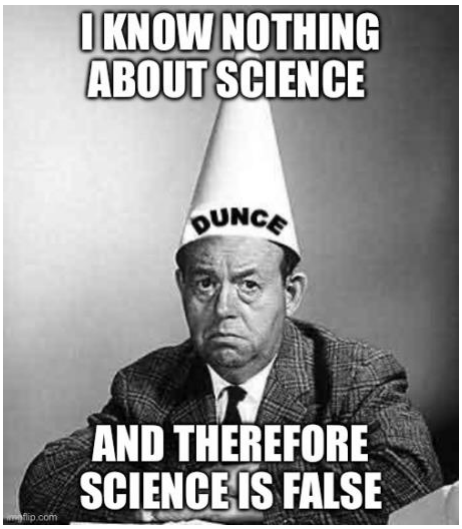
Exhibit F: 

Figure 12: Education Bias

Distrust in all science – disbelief of true, as far as we can tell, conclusions of reasoning in the world – is borne of the fatigue of the modern scientific process itself. The theories of Scientific Truth have been repeatedly disproven and replaced by new ones – Newton was defeated by Einstein, who has now been defeated by Quantum Physics. Likewise, in the life sciences – those related to biological and ecological health – the incessant supplantation of one theory by another weakens the trust in the enterprise's overall claim to truth with every new revelation. Whatever is true today has no guarantee of being true tomorrow, and whatever feelings of hope that may inspire, it also becomes a source of despair at the limits of our own understanding and leads to a distrust of those who promise to know. For example, Bill Gates recently called for a shift away from reducing carbon emissions as a means of fighting climate change to turn instead to concerted efforts to reduce climate-caused human suffering.[xxvii] For common, every day climate activists – those who defend the scientific legitimacy of climate change in real, and often tense, conversations – Gates' move was a major setback. Now, it seems that many of the climate deniers have been proved right – there is nothing we can meaningfully

do to stop global warming. The resulting despair that followed Gates' announcement was not a response to an epistemic problem but an existential one. As shown in **Exhibit G**, the inherent role of doubting in the scientific enterprise will always threaten to frustrate the hope and trust in its processes.

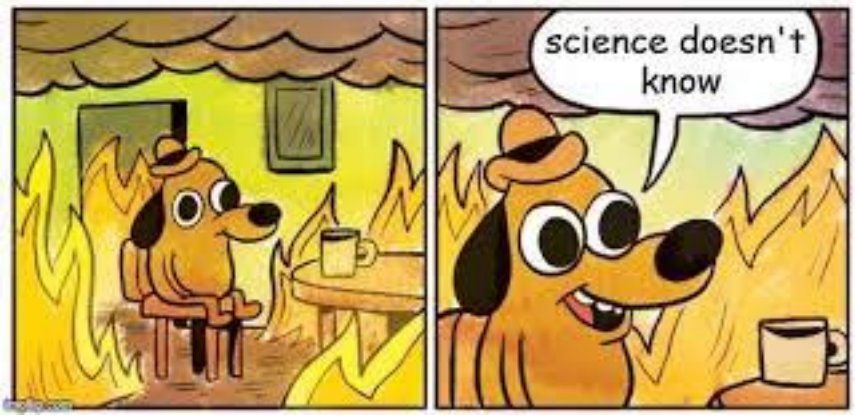
Exhibit G: 

Figure 13: Science Despair

The process philosophy underlying Scientific Truth seeks to insulate it against this hopelessness – any time a theory is proved wrong, scientists reassert their method as a sure way of discerning what is true – as **Exhibit H** claims. "Science is a process," they say; "Every time we prove ourselves wrong, we get closer to the truth," they claim. Just recently, scientists found new evidence that the archeological site of Monte Verde in Chile may not be as old as previously thought. Recently conducted carbon dating seems to indicate that the site is roughly 6,000 years younger than the current consensus. Responding to other scientists' pushback on the newly proposed timestamp, Dr. Todd Surovell said, "Given enough time and given the ability to do science, science is self-corrective . . . It eventually reaches the truth."[xxviii] But the reassertion of science's methodology is not a successful defense against science denialism.



Exhibit H:

Figure 14: Scientific Process

Now, Scholars, I recognize that this defense might *seem* to have merit; it is in the nature of modern science to supersede itself – good science should be able to accommodate new discoveries – and to assert that a falsified scientific claim was never science in the first place is to fundamentally misunderstand the scientific enterprise. I am not denying this; *I repeat* – I am not denying the validity of the processes of natural science. But this story is about the common mind, and, as a commoner, I must insist that you see how the constant experience of new scientific findings that invalidate earlier ones erodes the trust in scientific truth overall – as captured in **Exhibit H**. The point I am making here is existential – *not* epistemic; what I am trying to make clear here is the existential legitimacy of the position of science denialism. In fact, from the common perspective on life, it is the most plausible position.

Exhibit H: 

Figure 15: Scientific Existential Distress

Further – the cherry on top of the fragility of trust in Scientific Truth – the legitimacy of experimental science is undermined daily by its worldly association with the social sciences, including the most fallible and far-fetched claims of those sciences. Quite literally, the appropriation of the word 'science' by every social scientific discipline has eroded the legitimacy of all rigorous scientific study in the common mind – manifesting in ideas such as **Exhibit I**.

Exhibit I: 

Figure 16: Science Mockery

Science is that which is true *every time* it is tested or observed; the social scientists' claims are only true in very large groups over very long periods of time, and even then, only sometimes – never always. The more that philosophical inquiries branch off and attempt to join science – and the more that only what is scientific is thought to be worth knowing – the less credible natural science becomes. In treating the goings about of individuals in the world as if they are atoms in the universe who follow invisible laws of the psyche or society, statisticians have blurred the distinction between social inquiry and scientific experimentation and eroded the common mind's perception of science's authority – as seen in **Exhibit J**.

Exhibit J:

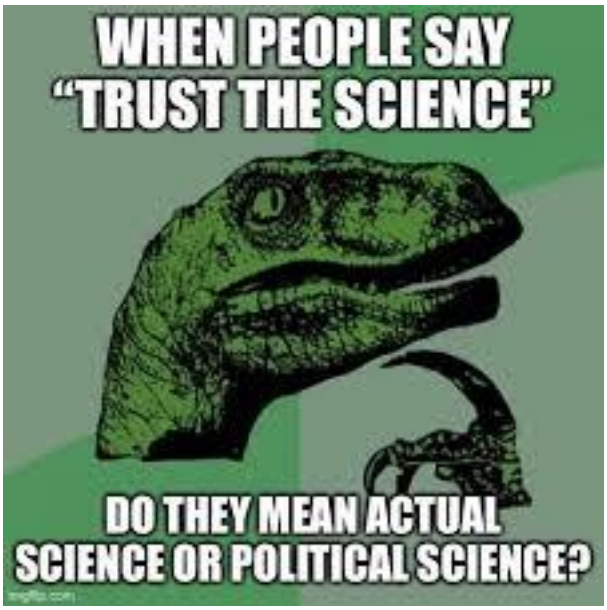


Figure 17: Social Science Distrust

Above I said that the propagation of Truth as it has been handed down to us fails on two fronts. The first – the fact that the stories of Truth never stay true for long – we have now discussed. On the other hand, quite unrelated to the truth of any given story, the philosophical history of Truth as it been handed down to the postmodern mind has become less and less meaningful with every new story. We started out as magic-minded creatures made to sit,

contemplate, and embody the perfection of God and the Big Ideas. When that failed, we thought that we'd be taken to Heaven to be with God, himself – and then we would finally know what this has all been about. Later, after realizing that contemplation as a means to knowledge was a farce, we decided that we were in fact meant to get up and pursue the secrets of the universe ourselves by using our brains to study the Truth of Science. Each new Truth sought to make meaning out of our inability to know the answers to life, the universe, and everything, but with every new story we became less and less sure that we were ever meant to know in the first place. We are obviously not God-like beings but desperate little critters scuttling about looking for any sign that we actually understand what the heck is going on – the absurdity of which is captured in **Exhibit K**.

Exhibit K: 

Figure 18: Science Hopelessness

As for our wish to be saved from the senseless suffering of this world, we were first told to wait for Jesus to come back and save us, then told that we would get to go to Jesus' Heaven instead, and later instructed to, once again, patiently wait for the future when the Progress of Reason would bring about utopia. The absurdity of which is seen in **Exhibit L**.

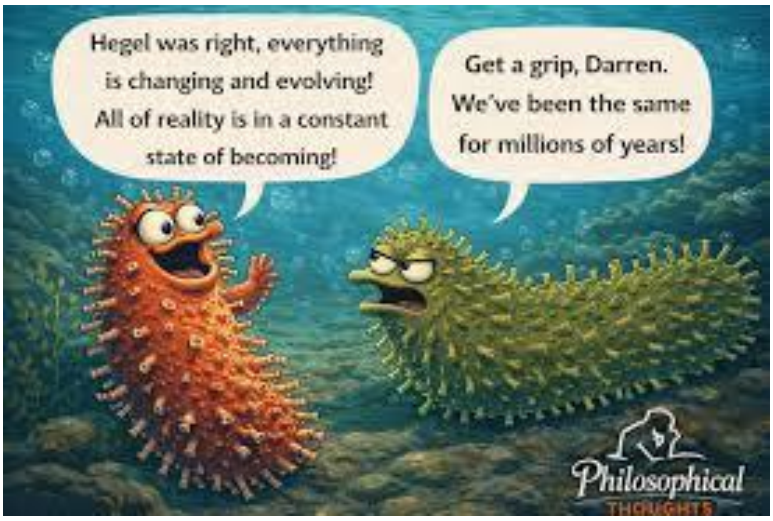
Exhibit L: 

Figure 19: Grow up Hegel

In the meantime, the social sciences teach us to categorize our sufferings into one of a few story-types, which are of no significant interest because those stories tell us that everyone experiences and thinks the same things in the same way, and, in doing so, they effectively rob us of the uniqueness of our individual thoughts and lives – as seen in **Exhibit M**.

Exhibit M: 

Figure 20: Social Science Rejection of Particularity

Not only has humanity's collective self-conception been degraded to nothing more than an impotent species of herd-like animals trapped here and forgotten, but individuals have been deprived of their particularity and been made to see themselves as mere duplicates of the specimen: human. The existential sentiment of that framework is seen in **Exhibit N.**

Exhibit N :



Figure 21: No One is Special

For example, the woman who constantly forgets what she's meant to be doing in the moment but nevertheless succeeds in meeting deadlines is not described as uniquely quirky and brilliant. She is said to have high-functioning ADHD – just like everyone else. See **Exhibit O**.

Exhibit O:

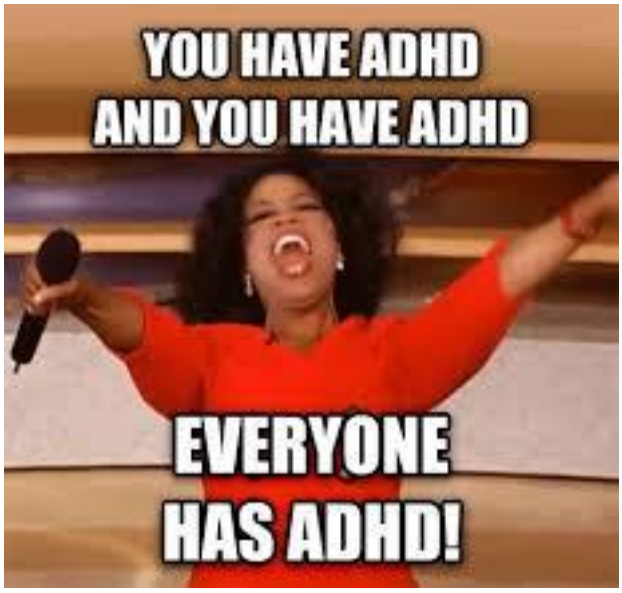


Figure 22: Diagnoses for All

This is unfortunate, because the modern era's shift away from seeking out the truth of reality via religious study to turn instead to the methods of scientific inquiry was our first major historical opportunity to engage in healthier ways of making and maintaining the world; reason – the brain's utilization of cause and effect within the world – is the most important method of world-building, and up until the modern age it had been bogged down by the mind's desire to think up meaningful stories about daily life. With the arrival of modern science, then, you might think that reason has been freed to pursue the nature of the universe; however, because of the pernicious influence of philosophy's erroneous conflation of thinking and reasoning, the process philosophy underlying Scientific Truth has crowned itself as the supreme arbiter of meaning.

As far as the common mind is concerned – and this is just true – modern science did not correct philosophy's error but merely shifted the weighted emphasis in the Truth formula from heavy on meaning to heavy on truth. While we no longer allow our minds' stories to influence our conclusions of reason, we now allow our brains to impose limitations on what is reasonable to think. Meaning-making in the modern world is expected to be scientific. This is especially visible in the Einstein template seen in **Exhibit M**, which is a trend in which meaningful thoughts are attributed to Albert Einstein as a means of appropriating some sense of legitimacy.

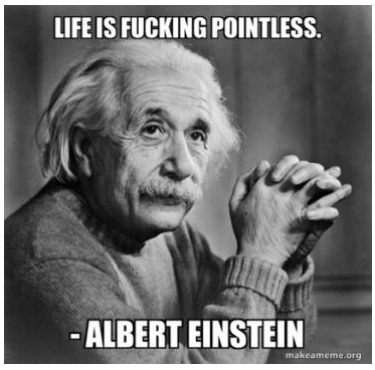
Exhibit M: 

Figure 23: Einstein said You Don't Matter

The cognitive dissonance of Kantian and Hegelian philosophy – the distressing burden of modern philosophy's demand to authentically believe in the biblical God as if science had not just proven many of the major claims of the Bible to be wrong – is just as present in modern scientific thinking.



Figure 24: Philosophy's Contradiction

The modern emphasis on quantification and calculation of scientific inquiry is posited as a hopeful – and therefore deeply meaningful – enterprise. But, in reality, it is a feeble compensation for the loss of religious Truth. Nothing could be further from the truth than the claim that science is inherently hopeful; the existential experience of science is one of despair – not hope.

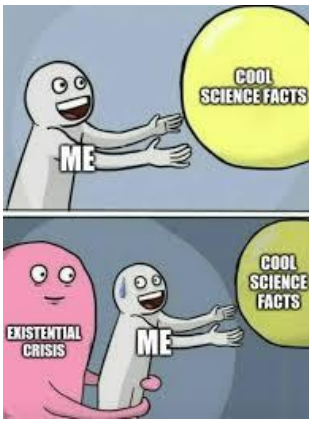


Figure 25: Existential Reality of Science

Our tradition's glorification of Scientific Truth as it has been handed down to us in the postmodern era is utterly absurd – it is not meaningful nor is it guaranteed to be true.

The Proof is in the Pudding[xxix]

In the last section, I argued that science denialism is a wholly legitimate position when seen from the existential angle as opposed to the epistemic one, and I made that argument by drawing on the postmodern authority of internet memes.

In this section, I will begin to blend memes into my writing as a means of employing them in my argument. My methodology thus raises one of the main questions in this section – why are memes authoritative? We will aim to answer that question in this final section, as well as confront some of the most pressing questions yet to be answered: What does science have to do with feelings? Said philosophically, what does reasoning have to do with thinking?

You might now be wondering, Readers, why it matters that science isn't existentially meaningful – why should feelings like hope or despair affect belief in scientific conclusions? What do feelings have to do with facts? This last question is *the* puzzle that has confounded our society for the last decade, and I, myself, have spent years obsessing over it.

Above I noted that the most common diagnosis of the social ailment that is science denialism is mass ignorance, and I claimed that that answer does not get to the existential root of the phenomenon. That argument might not have convinced you, Readers, if you are not, yourselves, sold on my existential argument as a whole. But consider further the fact that – regardless of mass society's very real educational plight and its influence on the common mind's estimation of science – the ignorance theory does not account for the educated science deniers.

Many educated individuals – indeed many doctors – have denied the reality of climate change and were proud covid-deniers. I am sure that every reader of this story can think of someone who truly *knew* better during covid yet chose to deny their knowledge. The true source of science denialism cannot be mere ignorance, or we would see its effects fall clearly on educational fault lines.



Figure 26: Stop Calling for Education

The second, most common runner-up to the ignorance theory is the frequently posited theory that science denialism is a feature of partisan politics. Specifically, it is claimed that all Republicans – and *only* Republicans – are science deniers, but my own common-sense reasoning rejects the claim that everyone has suddenly abandoned the value of truth because of mere political prejudice – even if that is true for some individuals. This answer is not only reductive and prejudicial, but is especially unsatisfying because the crisis crosses party lines:



Figure 27: Left-leaning Science Denialism

While the rejection of vaccines by a subset of the most privileged members of the liberal community is relatively niche, science denialism is just as rampant in liberals as it is in republicans, though the manifestation of it is much more subtle. It does not show up as a radical distrust in science but instead presents in an equally radical and thoughtless *trust* in science.



Figure 28: Trusting Authority is NOT Trusting Science

The postmodern, liberal move to readily adopt all of science's claims while imposing on themselves and the wider world a censorship on doubt is fundamentally an anti-science attitude.

While I understand that the mass liberal assent to science's authority during the covid pandemic was an attempt to deny nefarious members of society the opportunity to exploit the inherent role of doubt in modern science, too many people on the left sacrificed their own common-sense during the covid pandemic. In a desperate attempt to curb the fascists' incessant attacks on our scientific institutions, liberals have become less and less willing to think critically about science's claims.

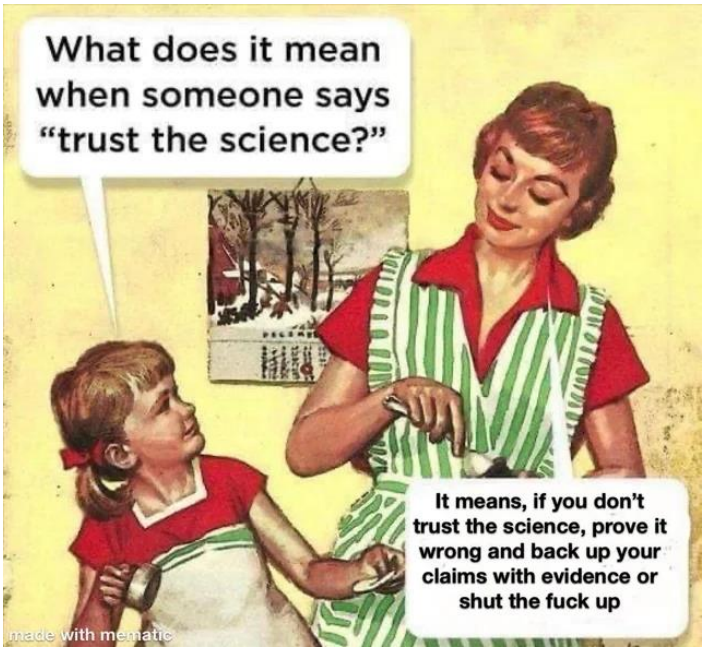


Figure 29: Left-leaning Rejection of Critical Scientific Thinking

Do not mistake my proficiency in existential yoga[13] for an authentic, personal distrust in science, Readers, I want to reverse the trend as badly as the scientists. I do not think that science denialism is healthy; I watched the rapid, bipartisan decline of basic common-sense during the Covid pandemic in horror. But neither ignorance not partisan politics explains the phenomenon of science denialism as I have observed and experienced it. Neither does the next most popular

[13] Phrase borrowed from Maryville College professor of philosophy Dr. William Meyer.

theory – less frequently cited than the mass classification of all contemporary science-deniers as fascists – which is that it has something to do with the internet. It is thought that the increasingly common practice of rejecting worldly facts – including scientific ones – is spreading through social media use. Something we are doing on the internet is decreasing the strength of our ability to reason with common-sense. This is the true answer, but *how* it works is the question – this is what this story seeks to explain.

Some of the popular academic conversations on the dangers of social media – of individuals developing scrolling "addictions" and being trapped in "echo chambers" – aim to conceptualize the crisis scientifically.



Figure 30: Dave Chappelle: Modern Problems

The thinking here is that social media algorithms systematically reduce the diversity of content shown to the user, and thus indoctrinate users with one – and often false – narrative. Conceptualizing the problem in this way allows for the hope that computer scientists can correct the crisis by tweaking the programming. Likewise, digital addictions can be diagnosed and treated by behavioral and biological scientists like any other addiction. However, the problem is *not* modern; indeed, the problem is ancient.



Figure 31: Sisyphus

While the explosion of social media use has surely hastened the common mind's declining faith in the truth-revealing capacities of the processes of modern science, the ease and speed of the ever-increasing rise of science-denialism in the postmodern mind is *still* rooted in the philosophical vice of Truth itself – that toxic confusion of thinking and common-sense reasoning. Otherworldliness – the philosophers' long-recommended means of escaping the shortcomings of this world – merely evolves in the postmodern era, and individuals everywhere are leaving the fragile truths of their reality behind to reside instead in a virtually curated one. We long for what the otherworld has always promised to provide – a more meaningful reality that explains the senseless sufferings of our daily lives. The internet is the most tangible and tantalizing otherworld yet, and our retreat to it is rooted in despair – not wonder.



Figure 32: Choosing Memes Over News

The fear-driven virtual escape of scrolling – the act of sifting through algorithm-driven social media platforms – offers a new source of stories that make for meaningful distractions from the shortcomings of the world. Scrollers – those who reside primarily in the virtual otherworld – leave behind the hopeless trajectory of our true world for the more meaningful Truth of Memetics:



Figure 33: Otherworld of Scrolling

Postmodern Memetic Truth overcorrects Descartes' modern earlier overcorrection to the ancient and Roman philosophical errors. Plato and the Roman philosophers of yore gave meaning more authority than truth in the Truth formula, and the worldly result of that imbalance was that, for centuries, we drew incorrect conclusions about the nature of the universe. For the sake of retaining the Truth of the Big Ideas and the Idea of Heaven, truth-seeking in the world was sacrificed. Descartes sought to correct their error by awarding truth more weight in the formula via the modern idea of Scientific Truth – at the cost of our historical stories of meaning, namely, religion. Because of philosophy's propagation of the Truth formula – because truth and meaning have been fundamentally linked in the history of thought – in doing so, Descartes reduced the common mind's estimation of storytelling as a necessary need of human life. The result of modern science's diminution of the mind's need to tell stories has been a violent reversal of modernity's overestimation of the value of truth and an existentially desperate return to the act of seeking out what is meaningful at the sacrifice of what is true.



Figure 34: Society's Reliance on Memes

Memes provide off-the-shelf stories:



Figure 35: Economic Meme

In a complete and highly compact package:



Figure 36: Friendship Meme

And whatever is conceivably true and mouth wateringly meaningful:



Figure 37: Faith Meme

Is True – *as it has been since Plato:*



Figure 38: Donald Trump Meme

The rapid and undiscerning adoption of Memetic Truth in the postmodern era is only the newest and most thoughtless manifestation of reason's narcissism. Remember that reason's narcissism imagines that it can find the cause for every effect; our brains expect to see their internal processes reflected in the world. The Scroller askes, "Why do I work so hard and still have such a burdensome life?" and Memetic Truth answers one user, "Because corporations are controlled by corrupt politicians," and answers another, "Because the government is infested with lizard people." The truth of the content does not matter – an explanation is an explanation. Users choose the story that is the most meaningful; the story that makes them feel the best:



Figure 39: Dope-a-meme Meme

But memes do add something new. Unlike the religious Truth of the past, where the cosmic umbilical cord still required at least some effort of the mind to think and contemplate the meaning of otherworldly stories, Memetic Truth feeds the Scroller bite-sized nuggets of meaning through an algorithmic trough suspended a few inches from their face. The novelty of the memetic stories' pre-determined meaning is slightly obscured by the framing of this story thus far. Every story of Truth I have presented seems to automatically invoke some fixed emotional

reaction – such as the wonder of Plato's ideas and the despair-numbing comfort of the Roman Idea of Heaven. The uniqueness of Memetic Truth can be revealed by thinking about the complimentary story to the Idea of Heaven – the Idea of Hell. I have neglected this story thus far because its historical legitimacy is even more dubious than the Idea of Heaven, but we will consider it for a moment to highlight the active reflection still present when thinking about the Truth of God.

When thinking about life after death, the Christian's mind – ideally – travels on wonder-filled thought-trains to the perfect realm of Heaven. In the mind of the guilty believer, however, the idea of life after death can easily result in a despairing thought-train headed towards eternal damnation. The core truth of modern Christianity is that there is a world waiting for followers after they leave this one, but *where* each individual goes after death depends on how they conducted themselves during life. The church presents the Truth of God to believers, but the subjective meaning of life after death can be either a comforting or terrifying story – and the direction of the Christian's thought-train when thinking about death depends entirely on their reflective assessment of their own morality. Contrarily, Memetic Truth provides both a factual claim as well as its inherent meaning. For example:



Figure 40: Heaven Meme

Note that this meme not only asserts the truth of the Christian claim to life after death, but it provides the Scroller with the pre-determined and meaningful story that they will be joyfully united with Jesus – leaving no room for the reflective thought-train on what life after death *means* to the user. In fact, this memetic story not only claims that the Scroller will be joyfully reunited with Jesus, but that they are actively excited for death – which, when shared by a user, is a sign of a very existentially troubled individual.

All memetic claims are emotionally laden. It is a structural feature of this communicative form:



Figure 41: Pizza Party Meme



Figure 42: Dissociation Meme

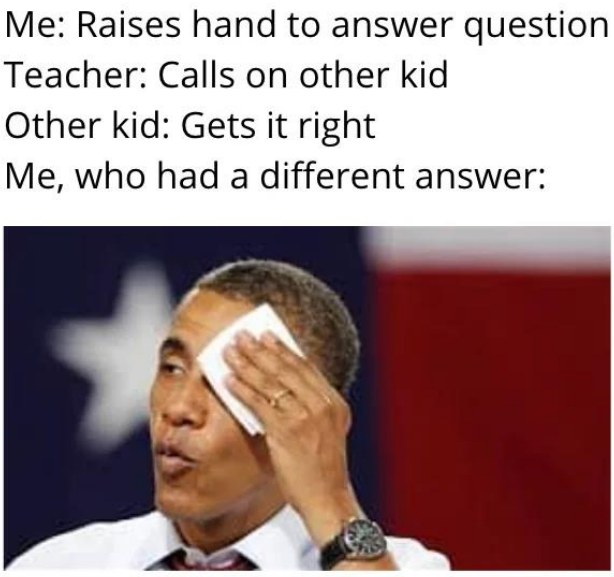


Figure 43: Obama Meme



Figure 44: Sad Song Meme

A Scroller does not ask themselves, that is, they do not *think,* "What does it mean to me if this is true?" because both the fact, or the lie, and its subjective impression are delivered in one image. Memes do not allow an individual to ask themselves about the meaning of their experiences while scrolling, because the story itself is baked into the factual presentation. Scrolling is more akin to contemplation than thinking. The mind does not reflect on the experience of memes and

move through the thoughts and conclusions of the Scroller's imagination. Instead, the final direction of the thought-train and the destination of its journey is given to the Scroller wholesale.

Here, Reader, is the existential source of the frightening decline of common-sense reasoning in the postmodern era, and the climax that this story has been building to. Recall earlier when I said that thinking and common-sense reasoning are necessarily related to each other via cosmic glue. The mind's need to think and brain's urge to know are fundamentally linked in the human experience; all humans have the ability to use their common-sense to navigate the world and then use their ability to think through the meaning of that experience after the fact. According to Arendt, the relation between them is hierarchical – thinking is the apriori condition of common-sense.[xxx] What this means, Homies, is that thinking must be mentally present in a person *before* common-sense reasoning can occur. Meaning-making is what we do when we think, that is, when we withdraw from the world and actively talk with ourselves to construct stories. Seeking out the meaning of our experiences while thinking is the origin of all question-asking – including common-sense questions about the truth of our reality.

Looking back on this story so far, we have seen that the philosophic and scientific pursuits of the knowledge of the cosmos always began with thoughtful questions about who we are and what we're doing here. Ancient Greek philosophers, including Plato, wondered existentially about the unique nature of humans when compared to the rest of nature's beings, while the Romans asked themselves what it could mean that their God had seemingly abandoned them. Descartes asked what it meant that mathematics and not divine revelation was the giver of truth, just as the social science's inquiries which track the way people tend to act under similar conditions are borne of individual minds questioning why so-and-so did what they did. Both thinking and common-sense reasoning follow experience, but thinking, that is, asking ourselves

what the meaning of experience is, occurs before we begin to use our common-sense to find concrete answers about experience. We think before we reason.

When we no longer use our minds, which happens when we stop thinking about the meaning of our experiences, then we can no longer access the reasoning abilities of our brains. When we no longer ask ourselves about the meaning of life in this world, we no longer ask ourselves about the facts of the world. What we see in the mass adoption of Memetic Truth is the mass abandonment of thinking. Scrollers are not reflecting on their experiences of memes; they are not questioning content they scroll. The mass abandonment of thinking when scrolling necessarily results in the mass inability to reason about the truth of memetic claims at all. Scrollers are not only mindless, that is, not only are they not thinking, but they are increasingly brainless. They no longer have the urge to use their common-sense reasoning to engage with their world.



Figure 45: Critical Thinking Meme

For the love of the World[14][xxxi]

So, Readers, where does this leave us? Hopefully, together:

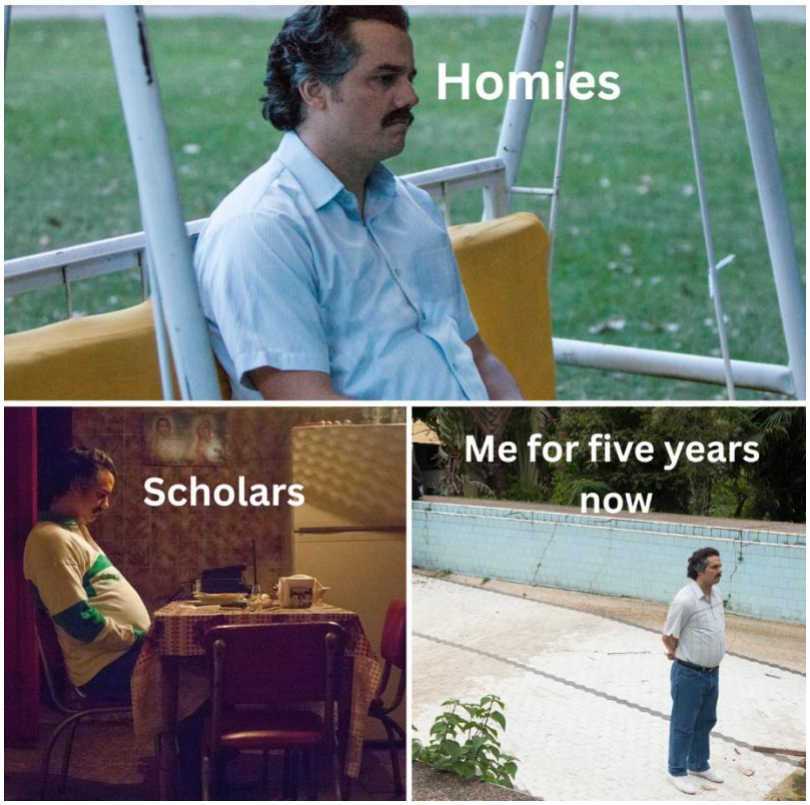


Figure 46: Postmodern Existential Reality Meme

Hopefully, I have now successfully demonstrated the relationship between the distinct, separate activities of thinking and common-sense reasoning. Further, I hope I have made clear in this story that philosophy is responsible for the historical propagation of the erroneous conflation of these two internal experiences and how that burden weighs on society's mass adoption of Memetic Truth.

[14] This is a reference to Susan Neiman's call – based on Arendt's call – to return our focus to the world.

But what does any of this have to do with the fate of world-building in the postmodern era? Recall in the introduction we learned that world-building is the joint construction and maintenance of our home atop the Earth. We are now, together, in a position to speculate.

Conclusive Thoughts

It is still more or less true in the modern world – the one in which we currently live – that local reality is a shared construction. Every resident of Knoxville experiences the same interstate, restaurants, and billboards whenever they navigate around town; schools and streaming services still provide a relatively uniform distribution of information. But that is no guarantee that it will last. It is just as possible that lived experience in the postmodern world will devolve into a mere simulation – a "place" where we exist, as Plato once thought we did – existing as passive minds receiving information via a digital umbilical cord linked to some otherworldly entity. But the algorithm is not inherently Good or Just or True; Memetic Truth is not limited to claims that are true but extend to those that are factually misconstrued and those presented as "alternative facts" – which are outright lies. We are already passively accepting the stories of memes without question, even though we know that most of them are lies. This crisis extends across party lines, generational divides, and socio-economic backgrounds.

Consider posts like these – those that present as bona fide but are known to be fake – which are frequently shared by educated and uneducated users alike:

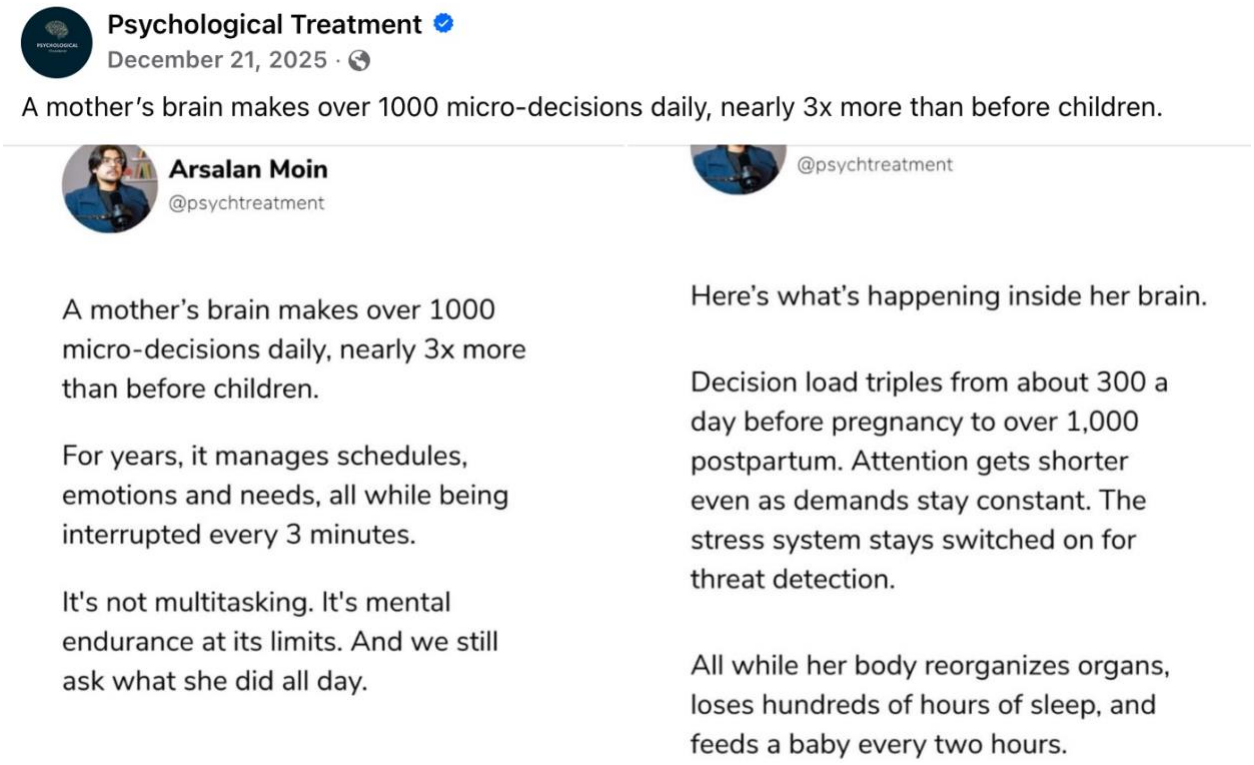


Figure 47: Fake Science Facebook Meme

Post such as these are slightly adrift of traditional memes, but they are following the Memetic Truth formula. In this example, the post is targeting mothers who feel undervalued and overworked. In a healthy world – I think – these mothers should be able to know that they are doing as much labor as a CEO *without* the validation of science. The very existence of this post and its rapid spread amongst mothers shows that the common mind is still in the grip of philosophy's vice, namely, the conflation of mixing truth and meaning. These women cannot find meaning in their sacrifice without the authority of quantification – or, at minimum, the semblance of it.

Memetic Truth is accepted or rejected solely on the basis of the user's emotional alignment with memes – which is regulated by the algorithm. Scrollers' feeds need not have true or even shared content to scratch the universal, existential itches of their feelings. Unlike the religious and scientific stories of Truth, the stories of Memetic Truth are wholly unique to each Scroller. Memes deliver specially framed claims about reality that vary across individual feeds; no Scroller experiences the exact same information as another. What is seen varies from person to person; reality varies from user to user. The Scroller is, virtually, in their own little world. The stories of the memes are irrelevant – only the sentiments they invoke become a shared worldly truth, and there is no common reality in the virtual world beyond the generally shared experiences of the soul's emotional register. The entirely random and differing claims of Memetic Truth do not give rise to joint question-asking about the truth of reality, because all Scrollers are united in their emotional assessment of the world. They all know what it all *means*; whatever individual experiences are had in the virtual world are ultimately, existentially, the same. Life sucks – who cares if it's true?

We don't need philosophy or science to make clear to us the real, existential risk to our species in the postmodern turn to the virtual world. The proof – as they say – is in the pudding. Our knowledge of the real world is becoming less and less accessible; the younger generations know as little about navigating their own zip codes as they do about navigating far-away cities. Many do not know who their mayor is or what type of taxes they pay – indeed many do not know how taxes and government relate with any meaningful understanding. The fact that Donald Trump was able to campaign on tariffs – a tax on American companies – to his anti-tax base and they *had no idea* that they were voting for higher costs is an acute display of the crisis in our

ability to know the reality of our world. The only thing that *is* known in the postmodern era is that the economy sucks – #itbelikethat:



Figure 48: It Be Like That Meme

We have become so far removed from the realities of nature and the meaning of a shared world that we are in danger of thoughtlessly abandoning our true home. The physical world is the only place that can shield us from the violence of natural disasters and provide a refuge for the maintenance and survival of our species. And whatever permanence a digital creation has online, it still presupposes an interconnected physical world to house data centers and facilitate the connection of our devices. The clout of the exceptional and viral influencer will be entirely temporary if their story has no durable place to withstand the passing of time; clout chasing is not the means to fame and worldly immortality that postmodern minds think it is.[15] If our only attempt at world-building in the postmodern era is in the construction of digital connection, then the entirety of our existence will become virtual – but we cannot eat digitized food; we cannot reproduce via cyber-sex.

[15] Scholars see endnote 5.

The increasing postmodern abandonment of the world is a very big, terrifying crisis, and our historical lack of willingness to find meaning in our daily lives as they are given to us has always been its source. We have always rebelled against our condition as earth-bound beings who must suffer existence and hardships without understanding why. Since the beginning of Western philosophy, thinkers have been consumed with cosmic glue questions about some otherworld but have never stopped to think about the influence of their otherworldly thinking on this world. Is it really any wonder that the common mind was so quick to turn from this world to the virtual one? Was it not metaphysical philosophy that taught us, long ago, to abandon the truth of our reality and any pursuit of meaning within it? Are most philosophers really any more concerned with life in this world than the Scrollers? Are they not also fixated on escaping the realities of our condition by constantly withdrawing from it and turning instead to the supposed Truth of their stories? Today's metaphysical thinkers are just as mindless, and just as brainless, as the Scrollers.



Figure 49: Mic Drop Meme

Conclusion to the Conclusion



Figure 50: Boromir Meme

Now having shared with you my story, Readers, I want to close with a word on my intentions and motivations. As you know, I returned to college to find the answer to life, the universe, and everything, and I learned that there is, in fact, no answer. There are *many* theories – some better than others – but nobody knows exactly how any of this works. In the common world, we hear this all the time: "Nobody knows the secret to life!" But, somewhere in the back of my mind, I always worried that people *did* know and that I just wasn't in a position to learn. But I am here to tell you, Homies, they don't know. They don't know how we ended up asking questions that we have no answers for; they don't know why our brains narcissistically expect the world to be as logical as we are. They don't even know why some people are bad and some are good, and they especially don't know exactly what formula will make a life worth living. So, in summation, philosophy doesn't really *know* anything.

But there are theories, and there is certainly a history of those theories – some of which have been made mainstream and others that haven't. In writing this story, I aimed to teach my Homies that history so that they may be equipped with a basic understanding of the philosophies

that guide our culture and mold our world. By knowing this history, Homies, we can recognize when its influence is at play – such as when we slip from thinking into contemplating or when we draw common-sense conclusions under the influence of wishful thinking. Further, when we can recognize the influence of an unhelpful philosophical theory in our lives, we can reject its authority. Too often do people imagine that our thought-patterns are absolute. You can think whatever, whenever, and however you want, Homies. Hopefully I have given you the tools, and the philosophical permission, to think freely about your lives, but also to recognize when it is time to get real and use your common-sense to look at the facts, and what the differences between those two experiences are.

Scholars, I recognize that not all philosophers ascribe to – or even engage with – in the theories I have laid out in this story. Indeed, if I was braver, I would have stacked my committee with Hegelians. But what I hope this story has illuminated for you is the experience of the postmodern mind, specifically, the experiences of the Scroller. Discourse on our worldly crisis so often takes place hundreds of feet above it – drawing on theory rather than direct experience. Moral judgements are passed on the science-denier and the doom scroller without any charitable thought for the reasons behind their actions. And minimal, if any, philosophical discourse is devoted to grappling with philosophy's historic role in exacerbating the existential plight of the common mind. The Scrollers do not need your judgements, they need your help – that includes the part of you, Scholar, that is also a Scroller. Hopefully, equipped with this story, you can begin to spot your own blind spots to the role that philosophy has played in the world, as well as the systemic otherworldliness that still reigns over the academy.

Receipts[16]

"To the OGs, I'm thankin' you now

Was watchin' you when you was pavin' the ground

I copied your cadence, I mirrored your style

I studied the greats, I'm the greatest right now"

- *J. Cole* [xxxii]

A scholarly objection to this thesis was brought to my attention, namely, that I have not yet demonstrated my ability to do academic philosophy. This is a valid concern, and I think it is important to address my methodology directly so as to provide academic readers with a proper conceptualization of this thesis. Discussions about philosophical methodology raise the question: What is philosophy? We will turn to that now.

The historical dichotomy of academic philosophy and public facing, shared, exercises in philosophizing was observed and remarked upon by political philosopher Hannah Arendt in her 1977 posthumously published book *The Life of the Mind*. Speaking of Socrates – one of her philosophical idols – Arendt writes: "It seems that he, unlike the professional philosophers, felt the urge to check with his fellow-men to learn whether his perplexities were shared by them – and this is quite different from the inclination to find solutions for riddles and then demonstrate them to others."[xxxiii] In this line Arendt provides us with a concise articulation of the two opposing ways to "do" philosophy. These so called "demonstrations" of riddle-solving are a reference to the dominant form of academic philosophy – the remarking upon, and self-indulgent play within, those "thought-systems of the great philosophers and metaphysicians of the past

[16] Urban dictionary: proof or evidence when there is tea getting spilled. Receipts can be tweets, texts, or any physical proof of something.

[that] have an uncomfortable resemblance to . . . the pseudo-sciences."[xxxiv] In contradistinction to those academic, system-consumed thinkers Arendt sees Socrates – who spent his life *in* the world questioning his peers about their thoughts and his own – as the exemplar philosopher.

Following the Socratic tradition, Karl Jaspers, an existentialist of the late 19th and early 20th century and a personal mentor for Hannah Arendt, broke with "traditional" philosophy – with academic philosophy – and argued in his 1919 work *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen* that philosophical systems are "mythologizing structures to which man flees seeking protection from the real questions of his existence."[xxxv] While Jaspers utilized "'playful metaphysics'" to think through philosophical ideas and communicate them to his peers, he saw proper Metaphysics "that claim to have grasped the meaning of life and systems that present themselves as 'coherent theories of the whole' as mere hollow 'shells' that . . . confer a false peace of mind that is inherently unphilosophical."[xxxvi] Unphilosophical philosophy – systematic thinking, we might say – reigns over the Academy today. This is evident by the Academy's expectation of assimilation to systematic thinking and by the equally self-evident existential anguish of academic philosophers when their demand is refused.

That is not to say that the academic pressure to assimilate to systematic thinking is motivated by authoritarian attitudes. Arendtian scholar Susan Neiman argued in her 2002 work *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* that the urge to construct systems of knowing for the unknowable is not "foolish or pathological," but in fact is "embodied in the principle of sufficient reason itself."[xxxvii] Claiming, herself, to follow the Kantian distinction "between the reason that sets ends in the world and the instrumental reason that calculates means," Neiman further endorses Kant's "belief that the drive to seek reason in the world – even, or especially, at the points where it seems most absent – is as deep a drive as any

we have."[xxxviii] The urge to find reason in the world is not contingent but necessary for the human reasoner, "For as Kant implied," says Neiman, "but never actually stated, behind the principle of sufficient reason itself is the assumption that the *is* and the *ought* should coincide."[xxxix] The urge to make sense of a world full of senseless suffering is a wholly human, and moral, enterprise. "Ethics and metaphysics are not *accidentally* connected," writes Neiman – "Metaphysics is the drive to make very general sense of the world in the face of the fact that things go intolerably wrong."[xl] But the "urge to unite *is* and *ought* is so deeply anchored that it's often maintained at too high a cost," she says; "Those who seek to unite them by force usually do more harm than they set out to prevent."[xli] Indeed, Neiman argues, "Belief in versions of original sin persists because experiencing one's life as punishment is easier than experiencing it as senseless."[xlii]

Neiman, building on Arendt, argues that underlying the history of Western academic philosophy up and through the modern age is the erroneous equation of the will to reason with the will to system – of the will to think about the nature of the world and our place within it and the urge to define that relationship once and for all – and her work seeks to save the freedom of reason from the systematic, academic, gatekeepers of Reason. "The picture of reason as inherently systematic is fatal to any form of philosophy we will want to preserve," she claims.[xliii] While noting that the "digital era has raised a host of new questions," Neiman, writing during the turn of the 21st century, was largely concerned with traditional philosophical questions in traditionally academic settings.[xliv] "People still wrestle with questions that moved Kant, and if philosophy ignores them, they will seek their answers elsewhere," she says.[xlv] Further, she pleads for the common mind's right to accessible philosophy – "Many people in many places are hungry for philosophical reflection."[xlvi] Speaking to her peers – conforming her thinking to the

systems of the Academy as a means of authoritatively speaking on and within her tradition – she bravely concludes her enterprise by writing, "May this book continue to call philosophy home."[xlvii]

Highlighting the Academy's traditional methods of grappling with evil – namely, the metaphysical thinking that philosophers use to make sense of the fact that senselessly bad things happen to good people – Neiman demonstrates the unintelligibility of modern metaphysics when called upon to provide us a meaningful conceptualization of life in this world in the wake of novel cruelty. Turning to the aftermath of WWII, Neiman – drawing on the thinking of Holocaust survivors like Jean Amery and Arendt, as well as post-war philosophers like Gorgio Agamben – demonstrates that modern philosophy fails to rationalize 20th century evil; the systems of Hegel and Nietzsche simply become untenable, and Adolf Eichmann, himself, stated that he was able to set his Kantian beliefs aside to carry out the Nazi agenda.[xlviii]
Yet, the Academy's demand that postmodern thinking be traditionally systematic; that is, the demand that postmodern thinkers philosophize in the modern (which is, now, outdated) way, remains a pernicious and fallacious tendency. "This is an old insight," notes Neiman.[xlix] Indeed, it is. It was not only old in 2002 – 24 years ago – but was acknowledged by Arendt in the 1970's, who said, "by now this is an old story."[l] Arendt writes, "All that needs to be said today on this subject has been admirably said by Richard McKeon: In the long and complicated history of thought, this 'awesome science' has never produced 'general conviction concerning [its] function . . . nor indeed much consensus of opinion concerning its subject matter.'"[li]

I am persuaded by Neiman and Arendt that the old systems do not provide an adequate means of grappling with the shortcomings of this era of the world. I didn't ask these questions in the wake of the Holocaust, but I see in my own time the same impotence of modern

systems to shed light on the experiences and needs of the postmodern world. Yet, academic philosophers, today, will still move to undermine postmodern thinking by demanding "proof" that modern metaphysics are no longer authoritative. But why? I suspect that the Academy is struggling to come to terms with the postmodern decline of the world's estimation of reason. I recognize that many academic philosophers still value and trust systematic philosophy and so claim that the burden of proof is on the postmodernist to argue that we are in a post-modern era. My thesis contributes to this conversation by demonstrating that we have entered the postmodern age of the world and that the futility of systems specifically can be seen in the mass cultural adoption of scrolling and the meaningful role that memes play in postmodern thinking.

Arendtian scholar Michiko Kakutani argues in her 2018 work *The Death of Truth*: *Notes on Falsehood in the Age of Trump*:

> The trickle-down legacy of postmodernism, [David Foster] Wallace argued, was "sarcasm, cynicism, a manic ennui, suspicion of all authority, suspicion of all constraints on conduct, and a terrible penchant for ironic diagnosis of unpleasantness instead of an ambition not just to diagnose and ridicule but to redeem. You've got to understand that this stuff has permeated the culture. It's become our language"—
> "Postmodern irony's become our environment." The water in which we swim.[lii]

Kakutani, herself, defines postmodernism as a movement caught up in the relativist waves within the Academy during the 1960s – "Back then, [relativism] was embraced by the New Left, eager to expose the biases of Western, bourgeois, male-dominated thinking; and by academics promoting the gospel of postmodernism, which argued that there are no universal truths, only smaller personal truths—perceptions shaped by the cultural and social forces of one's day."[liii] Kakutani recognizes the authority of the postmodern relativist movement (though she, herself, seems to think it was historically for the worse), and seemingly takes for granted – in 2018 – the common mind's rejection of the authority of old philosophical systems of meaning.

Unlike Neiman – who, 24 years ago, still felt that she needed to convince academics that the old systems were no longer authoritative – Kakutani takes the meager worldly influence of modern philosophy's authority for granted and moves to show how postmodern relativism has diffused into the world amidst that existential power vacuum:

> In the 1960s, when postmodernism took off in Europe and the United States, it was an anti-authoritarian doctrine, proposing an overthrow of old humanistic traditions, and as its tenets of irony, self-consciousness, and sarcasm leaked into popular culture, it could be seen, as David Foster Wallace observed in the early 1990s, as . . . a "bad-boy" means of exploding old pieties and conventions at a time when the world seemed increasingly absurd.[liv]

One can only understand Kakutani's work – and the nature of our current political crisis – if one accepts her claims about postmodernism; we can only begin to remedy a crisis if we first admit that there is a crisis. Thinkers who attempt to treat the current devaluation of truth by invoking outdated theories of truth-systems perpetuate the problem. They deny the reality that postmodernism is based, fundamentally, on a rejection of modernism. And the postmodern world is leaving these thinkers in the past. Far-right internet trolls, Kakutani explains, have already capitalized on the postmodern perspective of absurdism by weaponizing cynicism and irony through meme campaigns designed to erode the distinction between fact and fiction.[lv] I have attempted to show in this thesis why so many of us – me included – are existentially susceptible to this novel form of manipulation, and how the intelligibility of this new phase of the world is only accessible if one accepts that we have entered the postmodern era.

If one were to take her cue only from Kakutani's work, one could reasonably assume that the Academy at large has accepted the legitimacy of the postmodern position and, therefore, that academic philosophy should primarily be concerned with questions regarding relativism and cynicism. And, perhaps, this is true in some academic fields, but Neiman argues that this is not the case in philosophy; she reports: "The analytic division of philosophy into areas of

specialization and the German division of philosophy into *Lehrstühle* reflect a will to system grown embarrassed, not a rejection of it."[lvi] I have seen this firsthand in much of my academic experience. This is where my contribution comes in. Kakutani was primarily concerned with state-funded trolling and its influence on public discourse, but I argue that postmodern cynicism and relativism have infected all corners of the internet – not just the political ones – and all types of people – not just conservatives.

When considering the worldly devaluation of reason at the hands of postmodernist relativism – as argued for by Kakutani – and the repeated attempts by academics within the Academy to demonstrate to other academic philosophers that the modern systems of thought are inadequate to our postmodern needs – as argued by Arendt, Neiman, and others – I am persuaded that the Academy's continued demand that postmodern thinkers reason systematically is not justified. Instead, it is a reaction to the breakdown of the authority of our great philosophical tradition, which Arendt, Neiman, and Kakutani all theorize.

This brings us to scrolling. If the breakdown of systematic philosophy's authority leads philosophers to double down on philosophical systems, it has a different but parallel effect in the common world. The breakdown of authority induces a systemic existential despair in philosophers and non-philosophers alike. How can we tell? By showing charity and listening openly to people when they express a distrust in science – instead of shutting them down with facts – and by believing them when they recount their dissatisfactory experiences with religion. Most importantly, by recognizing that we are indeed in a postmodern world where the primary communicative form is the exchange of – largely – existentially distraught memes. I argued in my thesis that existential despair has driven postmodern individuals everywhere to the digital otherworld. The question has never been, "Why do people believe fake

memes?" but "Why do people crave memes at all?" All people scroll; they scroll to consume memes; they scroll as an attempt to participate in activism; they scroll to read the news. In the Academy, this same despair also drives thinkers to retreat from the postmodern world in search of that "peace of mind," as Jaspers called it, which is provided by older, more traditional, otherworldly systems.

I take this diagnosis of the dissonant behavior in academic philosophy to be entirely plausible – though, most assuredly, not philosophically proven. Can I provide an argument that would prove it? Well, to "prove" this claim would be to construct an analytic puzzle and demonstrate the solution; it would be to *do* academic philosophy. To argue this line of thinking would be to engage in precisely the systematic modern philosophical discourse that I – following Kakutani, Neiman, Arendt, and Jaspers – think is no longer suited to postmodern questions and problems. A different approach is needed in the postmodern era. I have constructed a thesis that aims to respect the conclusions of these thinkers, and now let me explain why and how it does so.

The contingent, worldly influence of the historically propagated demand of academic philosophy to reason systematically was the thread of harm – which Susan Neiman and Hannah Arendt have already established – that I sought to tease out in this thesis and reveal to my community in our own language. There is a *reason*, namely, reason's narcissism – the urge to system – that we think the *way* we do. By "we" I mean all Western thinkers, those in the Academy and the common world alike. There is also, consequently, a history of the thought trains that we, as common members of this world, have been trained to board – and these thought-trains oppress the freedom of our reason in everyday life. Neiman insists that to abandon system is *not* to abandon reason.[lvii] Often, academic thinkers argue that if we let go of the old

systems, then people will no longer make efforts to improve the world. Nieman recognizes this risk and agrees that those who hopelessly neglect reason's demand to unite *is* and *ought* in the world "do nothing at all."[lviii]

What then should we do to free reason without resorting to systematic philosophy? I have attempted in this thesis to free the experiences of thinking from the pseudo-scientific thought-trains of academic philosophy by presenting Arendt's arguments in postmodern fashion. It was Arendt who thought to trace the contingency of each thinker to demonstrate how their particular lives influenced their thought-trains, and I merely synthesized and stylized her claims to fit my postmodern needs. By showing to my community the origins of the ideas that define our thought-patterns, I sought to simultaneously erode any remaining authority of dissonance-inducing systems as well as inspire hope in the minds of my friends. If the Big Ideas are just ideas of a man named Plato, why shouldn't we feel entitled to think up new ideas ourselves?

Opposed as I am to the traditionally exercised methods of academic philosophy, I employed in this thesis the alternative methodology of *philosophizing* as laid out by Karl Jaspers. According to Arendt, Jaspers thought that the "mission" of his philosophizing was "not to instruct; it consists of a 'perpetual agitation, a perpetual *appeal* [Arendt's italics not Jaspers'] to the life force in oneself and in others.'"[lix] Arendt writes, "We become aware of Being by proceeding in thought from the 'imagined world of the merely thinkable' to the border of reality, which as a pure object of thought or pure possibility can no longer be grasped.'"[lx] This method of appeal was seen repeatedly in my thesis. For example, when I moved from the popular experience of contemplating Heaven to the equally popular experience of contemplating a perfect relationship. In that move I illuminated the different internal experiences of thinking and

contemplating to reveal the awe-inspiring and wonderful, and delightfully complex, experience of the human mind. I chose to focus on experiences that my audience would recognize and relate to as a means of fulfilling the conditions of accessibility and modeling the freedom to reason. By moving dialogue along these "border situations" – by touching stories about death and love and life – conversations become "transcendental" and this "'appeals to [our] freedom . . . [and] creates an arena of unlimited action.'"[lxi] Speaking as herself, Arendt adds, "through action" – through *dialogue* – "philosophizing creates the freedom of man in the world and thus becomes 'the seed, however small, of a world's creation.'"[lxii]

As I made clear in the introduction, my community, namely, young, scrolling Americans in my region, are philosophically oppressed; "In writing this story, I aimed to teach my Homies that history so that they may be equipped with a basic understanding of the philosophies that guide our culture and mold our world."[lxiii] Having spent years thoughtlessly scrolling away my days, myself, and even more years asking countless others about their experiences with scrolling, I know firsthand how many people turn to the digital otherworld to soothe their existential needs. The widespread reality of this phenomenon is ubiquitously recognized in pop culture; much of entertainment media takes the scrolling epidemic for granted. I find that Kendrick Lamar's line: "Anytime I couldn't find God, I still could find myself through a song / Many find they life in a phone" captures this aspect of postmodern experience most beautifully.[lxiv]

The dissonance-inducing influence of systematic Western philosophy has reduced the common mind's estimation of our freedom to reason, and the algorithmic, systematic message of memes is capitalizing on that devaluation by hijacking the compulsive will to system that underlies Western thinking. We see this in Part Two where I demonstrate the ability of memes to

make my arguments for me, and I showed that scrolling has replaced the reflective thinking induced by the old metaphysical systems. "Unlike the religious Truth of the past, where the cosmic umbilical cord still required at least some effort of the mind to think and contemplate the meaning of otherworldly stories, Memetic Truth feeds the Scroller bite-sized nuggets of meaning through an algorithmic trough suspended a few inches from their face."[lxv]

Kakutani, commenting on Neil Postman's 1985 work *Entertaining Ourselves to Death,* claims that Postman's argument – namely, that Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* was the dystopian future we were headed for and not, as George Orwell claimed in *1984,* a future where there is an authoritarian suppression of truth – to be premature.[lxvi] In the postmodern world, as we giggle ourselves to death via memes, we are also systematically being fed lies and denied factual truths. What I demonstrate in my thesis, what Kakutani takes for granted, what Susan Neiman warned us of, and what Arendt argued for, is that the rejection of factual knowledge is a philosophical problem – it is in virtue of a massively systemic existential crisis. By philosophical, I mean that the problem is inherently about how to go about living a meaningful life in a tragic world. All philosophy, according to Neiman and Arendt, aims to grapple with the problem of evil.

How do I argue for this? I use the methods of the philosophers mentioned here. Central to this methodology is irony. I echo Arendt's admission of her own work: "[the accusation] that the tone of voice is predominantly ironic is completely true."[lxvii] By way of ironically teaching my community about the structural role that philosophy plays in our thinking, I have taken my readers – including the Scholars – to the border situations to agitate our minds and appeal to our wills. When attempting to act in the world in this way, says Arendt, "Communicability itself therefore becomes one of the central issues of this philosophy."[lxviii] Seeing as it is not my goal in

this thesis to communicate solely to academic philosophers about academic philosophy – as the "Orientation" to this work explains – I employ here the vernacular of my community which we already use in our everyday lives. I philosophize in this piece *with* my homies by using the communicative paradigms that we collectively move within – including the memes that now dominate postmodern discourse. I have jumped up and down on the existential influence of reason's narcissism in the philosophers' compulsive urge to the will to system as a means of illuminating for my friends the largely subconscious influence metaphysical philosophy has had on our thinking. Through that process, I have also illuminated the experience of reason and the miraculous capacity that is our imaginative ability to think beyond our experiences as a means of compelling my peers to try their hand at that wonderfully pleasurable pastime that is free thinking.

Finally, in that process, I have also demonstrated to the Scholars the reality of postmodern thinking and its implications; indeed, I cannot *meaningfully* think or express my thoughts in any way other than in the vernacular of a postmodern conversation. In Part Two I moved to take the Scholars, not the Homies, to the border situations by oscillating back and forth between linguistic thought and digital memes to demonstrate both the reality of the postmodern rejection of modern systems but also the postmodern rejection of linguistic reasoning altogether. By using memes in my argument, I provided Scholars with a glimpse of the means and content of postmodern thinking, so that they may more effectively conceptualize the philosophical needs of the postmodern world. By observing my moves and the thought-trains I pursue, philosophers can observe what is relevant to the postmodern thinker, as well as the existential requirements of maintaining legitimacy when speaking with philosophical authority, namely, that the tone is always ironic, and that the perspective is always skeptical, if not outright cynical. The mere

choice of which of Arendt's stories I chose to highlight provides insight into which debates are still relevant, namely, science and religion, and my curation of memes provides ample evidence of the far-reaching influence of the new digital age.

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[i] Arendt, Hannah. Thinking Without a Banister: Essays in Understanding, 1953-1975. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. 2018. Kindle Edition, p. 143.
[ii] Arendt, Hannah. Between Past and Future (Penguin Classics). Penguin Publishing Group. 1961. Kindle Edition, p. 39
[iii] J. Cole. 'Middle Child." *Dreamville Records,* 2019. *Spotify*, open.spotify.com/track/2JvzF1RMd7lE3KmFlsyZD8?si=D7BZbueRR6iKRSt_pBcXqg
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[v] The seemingly random move to reference fame while discussing worldly continuity is made to subconsciously pique the Homies' interest. According to Arendt, worldly immortality had deep meaning in the everyday lives of the ancients as it was an individual's only means of triumphing over death. For example, a soldier could be so heroic in battle that – though he dies on the field – he inspires stories that survive well beyond his death, and in that way he could "live" forever. With the rise of Christianity and the afterlife, the value of the world as a means of preserving an individual's actions was forgotten. Now, in our time, when authentic faith in Heaven has become marginal, we see an entire generation falling back on the hope for worldly immortality in the form of clout chasing. While Arendt thought that striving for immortality was an honorable motivation to act within the world, she was careful to distinguish the great worldly actors from those mediocre individuals who sought fame from one big, showy act – which is how I would classify clout chasing. Gen Z and Gen Alpha express a real existential urge to achieve greatness – the ubiquitous wish to be a YouTube star is a response to the raw fact of death and the sense of life's meaninglessness that it invokes – but they lack proper worldly outlets and real, recent worldly examples. The move to bring to the Homies' attention that clout chasing is *not* a means to worldly immortality will not be made until the conclusion.
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[vii] Arendt, Hannah. The Life of the Mind: The Groundbreaking Investigation on How We Think (Combined 2 Volumes in 1) Mariner Books. 1977. Kindle Edition.
[viii] This idea is a paraphrase of Arendt's thinking in Chapter III: "What Makes Us Think" in *The Life of the Mind.*
[ix] For Arendt's distinction between the activities of thinking and common-sense reasoning, as well as the "intramural warfare" between them, see Part II: "Mental Activities in the World of Appearances" – in *The Life of the Mind.*
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[xi] Neiman, Susan. Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy (Princeton Classics Book 74). Princeton University Press. 2002. Kindle Edition, p. 320.
[xii] For a full account of Susan Neiman's thinking on sufficient reason – or reason's narcissism as she also calls it – please see her final chapter: "Origins: Sufficient Reason" in her book *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy.*
[xiii] For Arendt's work on ancient metaphysical assumptions and the influence of Plato in Western religious thinking as well as her articulation of the existential motivations for thinking see Chapter III, "What Makes Us Think?" in *The Life of the Mind.*
[xiv] For Arendt's articulation of Greek politics see Chapter II: "The Public and the Private Realm" in *The Human Condition*.

[xv] Arendt, Hannah. The Life of the Mind: The Groundbreaking Investigation on How We Think (Combined 2 Volumes in 1). Mariner Books. 1977. Kindle Edition, p. 487.
[xvi] For Arendt's account of the increase of worldlessness and contemplation that followed the historical shift from Roman society to Christian society see Chapter VI, "The *Vita Activa* and the Modern Age" in *The Human Condition*.
[xvii] For Arendt's articulation of the worldlessness of Cartesian thinking and modern science, as well as the existential nature of Descartes' thinking see Chapter VI, "The *Vita Activa* and the Modern Age," in *The Human Condition*.
[xviii] Arendt, Hannah. The Human Condition: Second Edition. The University of Chicago Press. 2018. Kindle Edition, p. 290.
[xix] "Why are there echoes on the radar, but no snowfall?." *Weather,* www.weather.gov/lmk/VirgaExplainedGraphically
[xx] For Arendt's thoughts on the insight and error of Kant's thinking on thinking see Chapter I: "Appearance" in *The Life of the Mind.*
[xxi] For Arendt's thoughts on Hegel's adoption of the process philosophy of modern science see Chapter III: "What Makes Us Think" in *The Life of the Mind.*
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[xxiii] For Arendt's thinking on the "pretension" of the social sciences see Chapter II: "The Public and the Private Realm" in *The Human Condition.*
[xxiv] "Entrance Testing." *pstcc,* www.pstcc.edu/admissions/entrance/
[xxv] Arendt, Hannah. The Human Condition: Second Edition. The University of Chicago Press. 2018. Kindle Edition, p. 322.
[xxvi] For Michiko Kakutani's work on the distrust of expertise in the common mind see "Chapter 1: The Decline and Fall of Reason" in *The Death of Truth*
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[xxix] For more on Michiko Kakutani's articulation of how memes have capitalized on absurdism see her work *The Death of Truth*
[xxx] For Arendt's articulation of the a priori relationship between thinking and common-sense reasoning see Chapter I: "Appearance" in *The Life of the Mind.* For Arendt's thinking on the passivity of modern society and our potential devolvement see Chapter VI: "The *Vita Activa* and the Modern Age" in *The Human Condition*.
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Vita

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