

# IMAGINE . . .

Fifty-Nine Thought Experiments  
That Tell You What You Think

EDWARD PACKARD

© 2023, 2024 Edward Packard  
all rights reserved

## CONTENTS

Introduction

The Miracle Wizard

Fifty-Nine Thought Experiments:

1. At Age Seventeen, Would You Rather Have an Exceptionally Wonderful Life Ahead of You, but Die When You're Fifty, Or Have a Mediocre and Unrewarding Life and Live To Be One Hundred?
2. At Age Fifty, Would You Prefer Be Living a Wonderful Life that's About to End, or a Mediocre and Unrewarding Life, Knowing that You'll Live To Be One Hundred?
3. How Does the Value of Mobility Compare with Being Able To Look Back on a Wonderful Life?
4. Is It Better To Be Courageous or a Coward?
5. Luxurious Solitary Confinement.
6. Your Very Own Universe.
7. You Are a Character in a Computer Game Played by an Unstable Adolescent.
8. You Die and Go to Heaven.
9. You Are About to Die, But Can Have a Second Life as an Animal.
10. You Are Aging Backward, but No One Else Is.
11. Risking Everything To Get Set Up for Life.
12. You Are Still Alive and Feeling Fine Even Though You're 125.
13. Comfortably Ensclosed in a Space Capsule, You Start Falling Upward, Accelerating at the Same Rate As You Would in Free Fall.
14. You Don't Know When You'll Die, but You Can Choose How You'll Die.
15. You are About to Die, but Have the Option of Living as a Character of Your Choice in a Novel that Has Become Real. The Events Described in It Are Actually Happening.
16. What Would You Say If You Could Talk to Your Earlier Self When You Were at a Much Younger Age?

17. Turning Back the Clock and Living Life Forward from When You Were Much Younger.
18. Imagine That What John Lennon Imagined in His Song “Imagined” Happened.
19. Would you Rather Have Your Brain Uploaded into a Special Purpose Super Computer than Be Dead?
20. You’re Living 30,000 Years Ago but Know Everything You Know Now.
21. You’re Twenty Years Old, and You Have a Super Advanced A.I Machine that Can Make the Right Decisions for You Every Time.
22. Checking Out the Scene One Thousand Years from Now.
23. Checking Out the Scene Fourteen Billion Years from Now.
24. You Have a Painful Epiphany.
25. Is Your Life Like a Novel?
26. Would You Want To Live Your Life Over Again after You Die — the Exact Same Life?
27. Would You Want To Live Your Life Over Again after You Die — Beginning with the Same Circumstances at Birth, but Because of Chance Variations, It Will Play Out Differently.
28. Imagine that the Species *Homo Erectus* Is Still Extant.
29. How Would You React if You Won a Billion Dollars in a Mega Jackpot Lottery?
30. Imagine that You’ve Been Transformed into Dark Matter.
31. Would You Be Willing To Reduce Your Future Life Span by Ten Percent to Learn the Answers to Some Major Scientific Questions and How the Future of *Homo Sapiens* Plays Out?
32. If You Open a Particular Door in Front of You, the Rest of Your Life May Be Consistently Wonderful.
33. It Seemed To Have Happened in an Instant: As far as You Can Tell, Everyone in the World Has Disappeared but You.
34. What Duty, If Any, Do We Owe to Future Generations?
35. If You Could Have Three Famous Writers, Dead or Alive, Join You for Dinner, Whom Would You Invite?
36. You’ve Been Sentenced To Live for a Year on a Remote Small Uninhabited Island and Can Bring Only One Book with You. What Book Would You Bring?
37. You Have the Chance To Have the Most Over-the-Top Single Experience of Your Life that You Specify.
38. You Can Choose To Have a Feeling of Complete Assurance that You’ll Go to Heaven When You Die.

39. You Promised Your Uncle To Perform a Ten-Minute Religious Ritual Every Day for the Rest of Your Life.
40. Can You Prove That You Are a Human Conversing with René, a ChatBot, even though René Claims that It Is Human and that You Are a ChatBot?
41. How Would You Feel When, on the Brink of Death, You Learn that You Just Won a Nobel Prize?
42. Which of These Three Persons Would You Prefer To Be in Your Next Life?
43. Imagine that You Had Never Been Born.
44. What if Logical Reasoning from a Sound Premise Leads to a Repugnant Conclusion?
45. Would It Be the Right To Subject One Person To a Half Hour of Agony to Save Ten Million T.V. Viewers from Missing the Thrilling Final of the World Cup Soccer Match?
46. The Limits of Civic Duty: A Case Study.
47. Suppose Everyone Held the View that Free Will, as Most People Think of It, Is an Illusion.
48. Can a Person Change Sufficiently To Become Another Person?
49. Can You Get Rid of Your Sense of *Self*?
50. Would You Want To Be Able To Dream After You Die?
51. Would You Like To Never Have Dreams When You're Sleeping?
52. Would You Be Willing To Be the Next Human Baby Born in the World after You Die?
53. The (Infamous) Two Children Problem (The Two-Child Problem); (The Two-Child Paradox).
54. If You Could Save the Life of Only One of These Three People, Which One Would You Save?
55. You Are the Dictator of Policy Relating to Animals Bred and Raised for Agricultural Purposes in the U.S.
56. Create Your Own Advisor.
57. A Brain Scan Reveals that within the Next Twenty-Four Hours You'll Have a Fatal Cerebral Hemorrhage.
58. Hundreds of Years after You Die, You Come Back to Life but Only for an Hour.
59. You are an Earth Inspector.

## INTRODUCTION

Thought experiments are almost limitless in their diversity and range. They are in the toolkits of many scientists and philosophers. Einstein found them helpful in developing his theories of special and general relativity. Military strategists employ them in what they call war games. Law school and medical school exams are replete with hypothetical cases — thought experiments in which students are presented with a set of facts and asked, *Imagine that you are the judge (or the doctor). How would you rule? (What would you prescribe?)* We all conduct thought experiments without realizing it, often as simple as “What if it rains?” The British philosopher Derek Parfit (1942 - 2017) was particularly keen on them. One of his celebrated ones is the model for thought experiment #44 in this book.

A thought experiment I’ve come upon a number of times is the trolley problem, which has been postulated in various forms. A version I remember asks you to imagine that you are standing next to a switch that can be used to redirect a trolley onto an alternate route. A trolley is coming along. *Horrors:* it’s on a route such that, if it keeps going, it will kill three people who are on the tracks beyond the switch. Fortunately, you can save them by turning the switch and redirecting the trolley on the alternate route. Unfortunately, if you do that, the trolley will kill a person who is on the tracks on that route.

*What will you do? You have seconds to decide. Pull the switch, and you will have directly caused someone’s death. But if you don’t pull the switch, three people, instead of one, will die because of your inaction.*

In one version of the trolley problem, in order to save three people, instead of pulling a switch that will result in the trolley killing one person, you have to push a person onto the tracks. Aversion to making physical contact in such circumstances tends to be stronger than acting remotely even though both actions produce the same result. Philosophical inquiries can’t ignore human emotions.

In his book *Life is Hard* (2022), the philosopher Kieran Setiya asks, “Would you choose to save one person from an hour of torment, or to relieve a multitude from mild

headaches?” In this experiment, unlike in the trolley problem, no one dies, and the facts are more nebulous. What is meant by “torment,” and how many is a “multitude”? It would be futile to try to be precise, and there is no right or wrong answer. Setiya, who suffers from chronic pain, tells of agonies he has endured. His personal experience with pain, rather than philosophical reasoning, may have formed his view that it would be worse for one person to suffer torment for an hour than for a multitude to have a mild headache.

One could argue that all novels, movies, and plays are thought experiments or series of thought experiments. They depict imagined characters, imagined situations, and imagined actions. This is taken to an extra dimension in the movie *Groundhog Day*, starring Bill Murray. If you’ve seen it, you probably remember that Murray’s character, Phil Connors, is a crude cynical guy who wakes up the day after Groundhog Day and finds that it’s Groundhog Day all over again, and this keeps happening day after day. Connor’s successive Groundhog Days are like a series of thought experiments, exploring the consequences of acting different ways in the same circumstances without affecting his real life (in this case his real life in the movie).

This process is immensely frustrating but instructive for Phil Connors. He learns what otherwise might never have been possible: how to stop being a jerk. A Groundhog Day comes when he behaves in a reasonably sensitive and civilized way. The young woman he has been pursuing, who was repulsed by his conduct on previous Groundhog days, gets a version of him she finds appealing. His succession of Groundhog Days ends.

Real life choices are rarely, if ever, so bizarre as the trolley problem, or so incommensurable as the torment and mild headaches problem, or so fantastical as the Groundhog Day problem. Nonetheless, constructing hypothetical situations and thinking about what would happen in various contingencies can expand your thinking and give you a window into your psychic state.

In the thought experiments presented in this book, I describe a situation and ask what you would think or do in these circumstances. Then, in most cases, to supply another perspective, I say what I would think or do.

Almost without exception, I don’t claim to be giving the right answer to these questions. Few of them have right or wrong answers. The thought experiments in this book aren’t intended to tell you what you *should* think; rather, they ask

you to consider *what* you think. This can be useful: Becoming aware of what I think and of the consequences of failing to think have freed me from insularity and improved my chances that when the road ahead of me diverges, I'll know which way to go.



## THE MIRACLE WIZARD

By way of accounting for the seemingly impossible situations that arise in this book, I'm pleased to present to you the Miracle Wizard, whom I'll refer to from time to time as the Wiz. As you'll soon see, the Wiz has an extraordinary range of imaginary powers, one of which he likes to show off by appearing right in front of you, which he is about to do now.

## FIFTY-NINE THOUGHT EXPERIMENTS

## #1

### **At Age Seventeen, Would You Rather Have an Exceptionally Wonderful Life Ahead of You, but Die When You're Fifty, Or Have a Mediocre and Unrewarding Life and Live To Be One Hundred?**

Imagine that you are seventeen. You're walking along on a bright spring morning, thinking about how in two months you'll be graduating from high school, when you stop in your tracks and blink.

The Miracle Wizard has appeared out of the blue and is standing in your path. It's not in his nature to bother with formalities, like introducing himself or apologizing for startling you, but you've been briefed about him, and you're aware of his extraordinary powers. You know that you'd better put up with him — he might have an important influence on your life.

"It's time for you to make a decision," the Wiz says. "From now on, you can either have a mediocre life, with more than your share of troubles, heartbreak, and career problems, but live until you're one hundred, at which time you'll die peacefully in your sleep; or you can have a rewarding, enjoyable, and accomplished life, including a happy marriage and delightful children, but, sadly, you'll die in your sleep a few days after your fiftieth birthday. Once you've made your choice, you'll forget that we met — you won't know what lies ahead for you. But whichever of these two lives you decide to have, that's the one it will be."

*What a cruel choice, you think when you hear this. Life has been good to you so far. The life you can have ahead of you sounds even better, but if you choose to have it, you'll only live until you're fifty. You don't want to die that young. You'd like to live to be one hundred.*

*Best to think a moment before making a decision. After fifty, physically, you'll be in decline. You'd hate to give up a chance for a wonderful life just to have many years more of an unenviable life, growing steadily older until you're a doddering senior citizen. You're still pondering this dilemma when the Wiz says, "Well, what's your decision?"*

\*

\*

If I were given this choice when I was seventeen, I'd probably think that if I chose to have a wonderful life, though it will only last until I'm fifty, I'll have thirty-three great years ahead, and that sounds better than a much longer life that's dreary and unsatisfying.

The Wiz told you that you'd forget having met him. If I knew that my life was going to be cut off when I'm only fifty, no matter how good it was, I'd probably think about it every day — it would drag me down. But if I didn't know I was going to die prematurely, that doleful prospect wouldn't hang over me. I'd live happily, assuming that I would have as much life expectancy as anyone, maybe more. In these circumstances, from the perspective of a seventeen-year-old, I think that living a great life to age fifty is the better deal.

## #2

### **At Age Fifty, Would You Rather Be Living a Wonderful Life that's About to End, or a Mediocre and Unrewarding Life, Knowing that You'll Live To Be One Hundred?**

Imagine that in the previous experiment, you chose the relatively short but wonderful life instead of the long but mediocre life. The years have gone by, and now you're fifty. Life has been good to you. You have a great career, a wonderful family, and you feel that in your work and in your interactions with others, in a modest sense, you've made the world a better place.

You're feeling a warm glow of self-satisfaction when the Wiz suddenly appears in front of you. As he had said would be the case when you first met him, thirty-three years ago, you had completely forgotten about him. Now it comes back to you — the choice he gave you, and how you said that you would prefer to have a wonderful life even though you'd die a few days after your fiftieth birthday. You feel faint thinking about it: You have only a few days to live!

"Relax," the Wiz says. "I can arrange it so you don't have to die in a few days. We just have to reach an agreement on something."

You try to keep from shaking. "What's that?"

"You'll have to agree to having made the other choice— having had a mediocre unsatisfying life — but you'll have good health and live to be one hundred."

"Huh," you exclaim. "How could that happen?"

"Simple," the Wiz says. "I'll wave my wand, and a moment later, you'll find yourself in the circumstances you would be in today if you had chosen to live a long mediocre life. You won't have any sense of having lived the wonderful life you've experienced. Instead, you'll remember the entire disappointing life you've led. The upside is that you'll have five decades of healthy life ahead of you."

"But it will be a mediocre humdrum life," you exclaim, "and that's what I'll remember about my first fifty years. What a come-down!"

“I have to agree with you,” the Wiz says. “Though it’s not as much of a come-down as having your life end a few days from now. But you’re right: If you opt to change to the long mediocre life, it’s not as if you’ll have lived the wonderful life that you remember right now — you will never have had it! Those great times won’t have happened. Given all the considerations involved, what will you choose to do?”

*Is it more important to you to be alive even if you’re a nobody and not especially happy than to have lived a wonderful life and soon be dead but be remembered for all the good things you did and having your wonderful spouse and children living on?*

It took me some time to decide what I’d do in this situation. I thought about what it is that would make a life great. It’s not just a function of the amount of money you have or the degree of success or status you attain. In a way it depends how much spirit you have — what you make of life.

I’m trying to get my thinking straight about this. If I accepted the Wiz’s offer to transition to the long mediocre life, I could at least hope that it would get better. That would mean a lot to me, even though right now, before I make my choice, I know that it won’t get better. That ignorance-is-bliss factor might tip the scales for some people. I might opt for the long dull life if I didn’t feel that I had a duty to stick with my present life even though it’s about to end. If I chose to have lived the mediocre life, I’d live to be one hundred, but the good times I’ve had in life will never have happened. More important, I would be committing my children to never having been born. That seems almost as bad as killing them. It’s unfortunate, but it seems like the right thing to do is to keep the life I’ve had and prepare to die. At least I’d have a brief period during which I could reflect with satisfaction about the wonderful life I’ve had.

But this makes me think of what would be an even starker choice. Suppose people close to you is not a factor, and you’re not about to die, but already dead. Would you rather be alive and have fifty years more ahead of a mediocre and unsatisfactory life ahead of you, or to have had a wonderful life in all respects except that you

recently died? From your perspective, does it make the slightest difference what kind of life you lived once you're dead? Of course, once you're dead, you don't have any perspective, so maybe that's a meaningless question.

### #3

#### **How Does the Value of Mobility Compare with Being Able To Look Back on a Wonderful Life?**

Imagine that you are single, and in your late seventies, and recently moved into a retirement home. You may be looking back at the wonderful life you've had, or you may be looking back on the unsatisfying life you've had. It seems like a no-brainer when the Wiz gives you the option as to which of these two your past life has been like.

"A wonderful happy life, of course," you say.

Not to your great surprise — it's just like the Wiz to throw a curve ball like this — he tells you that if you've been living a wonderful happy life, you're about to be diagnosed with irremediable spinal stenosis and will have to use a walker to get around for the rest of your life; whereas, if you've been leading a mediocre unsatisfying life, thanks to a successful course of physical therapy, you'll be fully mobile and would even be able to play tennis, if you knew how to play or could afford to learn.

*Other considerations being equal, in your late seventies, would you rather have had an unsatisfying life, but have excellent mobility, or be severely hampered in your activities, but able to look back on the wonderful life you lived?*

I would go for having had the unsatisfying life coupled with excellent mobility. I'd try to think of a way to avoid looking back on my unsatisfying life — I would try to cultivate a state of mind such that I could dwell on positive things. I think I could convince myself that, regardless of whether my life up until now has been satisfying or not, all that has happened is in the past, and that my focus will be on the present and the future.



## #4

### **Is It Better To Be Courageous or a Coward?**

The Wiz tells you that you are about to start a whole new life and will have no memory of the one you've been living up until now. Luck will play a big role in the kind of circumstances in which you'll find yourself, but you have been granted one option before your new life begins. You'll be allowed to choose whether to be courageous or a coward.

*Would you choose to be courageous or to be a coward?*

"Well, goodness," I'm guessing you'd say. "Wouldn't anyone rather be courageous than a coward?"

"Maybe; maybe not," the Wiz says. "Before you decide which you want to be, let me give you an example of how this might play out in the life you'll be living:

"Imagine that you're in your mid-twenties and in good physical condition, and you're walking past a modest two-story house and are shocked to see smoke pouring out of one of the second-story windows. A car pulls up alongside you. The driver, an elderly man, lowers his window and waves his cell phone. 'I'm calling nine-one-one,' he yells.

"Seconds later, a frail-looking woman, accompanied by a thin cloud of smoke, stumbles out the front door. She's coughing and can barely walk.

"*'Help!'* the woman cries, pointing up at another second-story window. 'My granddaughter is sleeping in that bedroom — she's just a baby!'

"You glance up at where the woman is pointing. The baby must be in a bedroom at the corner of the house opposite the room with smoke pouring out. You're trying to gather your wits when you see flames shooting up from a hole in the roof in the middle of the house.

"You try to think fast and keep calm. You don't hear any sirens. It may take several minutes for the fire department to arrive, maybe more."

The Wiz pauses, perhaps trying to achieve dramatic effect, then continues:

“At this point, you don’t have a decision to make. You will have already chosen whether to be courageous or a coward in this life. If you chose to be a coward, you stay put and say to the baby’s grandmother, ‘The fire department should be here any moment!’

“You peer anxiously down the street, hoping to see a fire truck coming. It seems like forever, but less than a minute later, you hear a siren; then you see a fire engine turning a corner and heading toward you. Thank goodness, you think, help is on the way! But will it get here in time?”

The Wiz sweeps his right arm through the air and doesn’t answer the question he asked. Instead, he continues:

“That’s not what happens if you are a courageous person. In that case, almost the instant the woman says that there’s a baby sleeping upstairs, you take a deep breath, rush into the house and run up the stairs, intent on saving the baby.”

“Then what happens?” you ask.

The Wiz rubs his eyes. “You make it upstairs. There’s smoke in the hallway. It takes you a few moments to get your bearings, but you find the baby’s bedroom, pick her up from her crib, and rush out of the bedroom only to find that the stairs you just climbed are engulfed in flames. You rush back into the bedroom, still holding the baby, and open the front window. A fire truck is pulling up in front of the house. Firemen jump out and begin unreeling hoses. You yell at them. One of them looks up and sees you with the baby in your arms. He runs up to side of the house beneath you. You drop the baby. He gracefully catches her. The baby is saved, but the flames are advancing. You rush back to the top of the stairs, thinking you can get down safely now that you’re not carrying the baby, but you see there’s no chance, so you rush back to the bedroom. You realize you’ll have to jump out the window. At that moment the roof collapses, crushing you to death.”

You feel stunned, hearing this account.

“Sorry,” the Wiz says, “but that’s what might happen if you’re courageous.”

“And if I’m a coward?” you ask.

“If you’re a coward, you wouldn’t try to rescue the baby. It would have been crushed by the falling roof or burned to death before the firefighters have a chance to place a ladder against the side of the house. You would feel terrible. You’d spend months trying to come to terms with how you didn’t try to save the baby. You’d lie awake at night, thinking about it.”

Hearing this, conflicting emotions swirl in your head.

“Now you have another chance to decide,” the Wiz says.  
“When your new life begins, do you choose to be  
courageous or be a coward?”

*If you choose to be a coward, turn to page 19.*

*If you choose to be courageous, turn to page 20.*

“Call me a coward, Wiz,” you say. “I don’t mind. If something like what you described *did* happen, it would be too bad I failed to save the baby, but I’d still be alive! I’d rather keep living than be a dead hero.”

“Sorry” is one of the Wiz’s favorite words, and he uses it now:

“Sorry,” he says: the trouble is that, even if you never encountered a situation in which courageousness and cowardliness come into play, you’d never feel as good about yourself as you would if you had chosen to be courageous. Your decision would take a toll every day. If you had decided to be courageous, you would have had a slightly greater chance of dying at a younger age than if you were a coward, but you’d feel better about yourself. You would live a more satisfying and noble life. Next time, if you have a chance, choose to be courageous.”

“I choose to be courageous,” you tell the Wiz. He nods and tells you that you made the right decision. He goes on to say that courageous people tend to feel better about themselves than cowardly people do, and that they should: They are better people than cowards.

I agree with the Wiz, but he might have added that people aren't always cowardly or always courageous. I think of myself as courageous, but maybe I've suppressed memories of acting cowardly. One such memory I didn't suppress is of a time when I was fifteen years old and I was in a room with some other guys, and one of them — an aspiring alpha-type who was on the school wrestling team — was taunting and administering little jabs at another kid. I felt very uncomfortable and had an urge to rebuke this bully. I'd been bullied myself and knew what it was like. I wouldn't have been able to best this thuggish character physically, but I could have called him out on his behavior. The kid being bullied would have appreciated that. Instead, I sat squirming nervously without saying or doing anything until the episode mercifully reached an end.

Sometimes, as in my case, courage gives way to cowardice. Sometimes courage overcomes cowardice. My father was a blimp pilot in World War I. His job was to patrol the U.S. coastline and drop depth charges on German submarines. He never located any, but on one mission his blimp developed a leak and slowly lost altitude until it flopped into the ocean. Pop and his crewman took to their life raft. They drifted for several days and were almost out of rations when they were spotted by sailors on a Chilean freighter. The ship altered course and turned toward them. Rescue seemed imminent, but then the ship turned away and resumed its original course.

That was probably the lowest moment in Pop's life, but to his amazement, the ship changed course again, this time turning toward them. It continued its approach, then slowed almost to a stop as it pulled alongside the raft. Sailors lowered a cargo net. Pop and his crewman climbed aboard. The captain met them and explained that, after changing course with the intention of rescuing them, he became afraid that the raft with two men in it was a trap laid by a German sub commander. He ordered the helmsman to resume the ship's original course. Almost as soon as he had made that decision, another emotion took hold: distress at having

deserted two men in peril. He ordered the helmsman to change course again and head toward the raft. I suspect that he felt happy after taking Pop and his crewman aboard.

## #5

### **Luxurious Solitary Confinement**

The Miracle Wizard is back, this time with the sad news that you have only a few days to live, but he quickly adds that you needn't despair: Instead of passing into nonexistence, you can choose to live in solitary confinement, not in any way resembling a prison, but in a beautifully designed extraordinarily well-equipped house on a large lush island with a fabulous climate and sparkling clear lakes, streams, and waterfalls. Not only that: there's an impressive mountain nearby with a trail leading to the summit, from which you'll have a superb view of the ocean in all directions. You'll have a tremendous stock of books you can read, musical recordings you can listen to, video games you can play, movies you can watch, virtual realities you can experience, a state-of-the-art kitchen, and an ever-stocked pantry and refrigerators always filled with your favorite foods.

Your house has beautiful surroundings, a fifty-meter-long swimming pool, heated to whatever temperature you like, and use of a nearby ski and spa resort operated by unfailingly courteous robots. You're guaranteed good health, and you're likely to enjoy having every kind of workout equipment, a sauna, a lovely garden visited by a great variety of song birds, and you'll have many other perquisites, all tailored to your interests and tastes. The downside of this attractive setup is that you will not encounter a single other human being, ever.

Since the alternative is to resign yourself to dying in a few days, you're about to take the Wiz up on this offer when he tells you that you'll never be able to leave this place. You won't age, you can't get sick, but neither can you die. Any attempt at suicide will be futile. How long you'll continue to exist in this paradise is unknown. "It could be forever," the Wiz says.

*Given the restrictions and limitations that come with it, do you opt for luxurious solitary confinement, or resign yourself to dying in a few days and not coming back to life?*

\*

\*

*Hmmm.* The Wiz said that this new life might last forever, and no suicide attempt would work. You've read that solitary confinement has such a bad effect on people that many consider it to be a form of torture. Taking the Wiz up on his proposal might be fun for a while — you'd be living in luxury, not in a jail cell — but it would take a toll on you. Over the long run, it might indeed be like being tortured. It seems best not to take a chance.

Having said that, it occurred to me that being dead is solitary confinement too, though you're not conscious of it. On further reflection, I'm inclined to accept the Wiz's offer. I'm guessing that I could find enough human company in books and movies and listening to human voices singing even if only on recordings. Then again — alone forever? I don't know about that. I never thought eternal bliss could be scary, but this form of it is.



## #6

### Your Very Own Universe

Many physicists and cosmologists think it's likely that there are multitudes of universes. They have no proof that this is so, but the existence of other universes would resolve some cosmic enigmas for which there's no present explanation. In any case, there's almost unanimous agreement among experts that the universe we are in came into existence about 13.8 billion years ago when the event occurred that came to be known as the Big Bang.

You have read about this, so you know what the Wiz is talking about when he appears and informs you that there are indeed multitudes of universes and that new ones are coming into existence all the time. Moreover, he says that they form so readily that he can assign you to be in charge of one. You can be that universe's God!

*Do you say to the Wiz, "No thanks. That's more responsibility than I want to take on right now." Or do you say, "Sure, I'll give it a whirl."*

Assuming that you choose the latter option, you have quite a task ahead. According to the instruction manual for universe creators that the Wiz has given you, your first step is to decide whether you want to create a universe in which the physical laws and parameters are such that life can emerge. The Wiz informs you that the vast majority of universes are flops. The laws of physics that obtain in them are such that they either collapse or blow apart, sometimes within milliseconds after they come into existence.

That's no fun, you think. You want to have living organisms in your universe.

"No problem," the Wiz says, after reading your mind. He gives you specifications for satisfactory physical laws and parameters. You crank them in, and *whoosh* — you're witnessing your universe's Big Bang.

Fortunately, you can fast forward, so you don't have to wait several billion years, which is what it takes before life starts evolving in even the most promising new universes. As soon as that happens in your universe, reports begin reaching you (thankfully much faster than at the speed of light, which, from your divine standpoint, is exceedingly sluggish). Proto-bacteria have appeared on thousands of planets in one of the first galaxies to form. About a hundred thousand trillion billion more proto-bacteria will form in billions of your universe's galaxies during the next few billion years, and you won't have to lift a finger to make it happen.

*What have you wrought?*

That's not an idle question. Given that conditions in this universe are quite similar to those in the universe you grew up in, within another few billion years, and maybe sooner, sentient creatures — animals — will appear and evolve.

You know that life has never been easy for most sentient creatures that have lived on Earth. The philosopher Thomas Hobbes said that, for people without a government, life is poor, nasty, brutish, and short. That's been the case for the majority of humans through the ages. For animals with smaller brains than ours, circumstances have been even worse, which reminds me that the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer concluded that life is something that shouldn't have happened.

As the God of your universe, you have tremendous power, but some weighty questions have been thrust upon you; for example, in your universe do you want to have adorable-looking animals similar to seals that have to go through their lives in terror that at any moment they'll be chewed to pieces by the equivalent of a polar bear or a killer whale? And what about people? A tiny percentage of people on Earth have lived very well, but huge numbers have been no better off than weasels and toads. Countless millions of humans have spent their lives as slaves. Are you willing to let that happen in your universe? You could be the agent causing thousands of billions of creatures similar to people to spend much of their lives in pain. You don't want that! Is there a way to fix your universe so that life isn't as hard for creatures as it's been in your home universe?

Of course, echoing the philosopher, Gottfried Leibniz, you could say, "Look, the planet Earth in the universe I grew up in is the best of all possible worlds, so give me a break." Or you could be less crude and say, "What about all the great

achievements of humans in art, music, and science? I'm not going to stop that from happening in my universe!"

*How are you going to make a better universe than the one we're in without it being boring, and is that even possible?*

Maybe it's possible, although it may be that creatures need to endure some adversity, even pain, so they can have challenges to overcome, something to add zest and spiritedness to their lives. In any case, there's clearly too much suffering and cruelty in our universe. What can you do to prevent it in yours? Suppose you instilled a compassion gene in every sentient being. The average amount of compassion that every member of every species in your universe has will be a notch greater than it would be if such creatures had evolved without the nudge you're giving them.

A disturbing thought comes to mind: Would creatures whose genetic code had been designed that way function properly? Animals and human-like creatures in your universe might need natural selection rather than a divine gene tinkerer to survive. You realize that this is true when you consider how long a hyena with a compassion gene would survive in its pack.

Is there a way to have no hyenas in your universe — no carnivores? Could you have one where the pretty creatures that evolve will be content munching on grass and fruits and nuts and so forth and not live in fear?

If you achieved that, then, with no predators to keep them in check, they would probably multiply exponentially and devour all the edible plant life. They would compete more and more, biting and stomping each other to death in the battle for plant food. How can you avoid such unintended consequences, ones you can think of and ones you can't? That's a big question for you.

I'm sorry. I don't mean to be downbeat. I wish you good luck with your new universe, but don't have any illusions. It's not all peaches and cream being God.

### **You Are a Character in a Video Game Being Played by an Unstable Adolescent**

You are living in a computer simulation. You're the avatar of an unstable adolescent (the "U.A." who is playing a video game). The guy who is manipulating you wants you to succeed. He wants you to overcome the Krogicides who are trying to capture you and drag you off to the Krellium mines, where you'll have to work twenty-two hours a day doing slave labor while toxic fumes rise around you and orange-eyed lizards nip at your heels.

Permit me to digress. Are you aware that some big-brained hominims, like the philosopher Nick Bostrom, for example, think that we humans are all living in a computer simulation? This could really be happening, so the U.A. himself may be living in a simulation. He may be at the mercy of the overlords, as I'll call them. They may be responsible for his unstableness!

This is not a pretty scenario, but, in your case, there's a silver lining. Thanks to the Miracle Wizard, unlike every other avatar in a video game, you can see that the U.A. is unwittingly leading you down a path where Krogicides are waiting. You want to veer off the track you're supposed to be moving on. You've got to do this to save yourself.

At the moment, the U.A. is distracted. He's exchanging text messages with his girlfriend instead of manipulating you and watching out for Krogicides. You don't wait to make your move:

*There.* You managed to go off the trail you were on. Or so you think. It might have been the overlords who turned you so that you were facing and moving in a different direction and made you think you did it of your own volition. In any event, you were able to hide behind a boulder before a Krogicide scout came by. You're safe for the moment, but you'd like to get back to base camp before the U.A. starts paying attention.

*Oh, oh.* You feel a tug on your shoulder — you're being pushed along. The U.A. *is* paying attention now, and he's eager to keep you from getting captured. Good for him. He's trying. He feels smug. He thinks he saved you, but he doesn't realize how you helped him (or the overlords helped

you help him). What a lucky U.A. he is to have you as his avatar!

It won't last. He stood up and is staring aimlessly out the window, wishing for something but he's not sure what.

The U.A. isn't playing, but you feel yourself moving on the board, walking on a path that runs along a cliff overlooking the sea. This is remarkable. The overlords are playing the game without bothering to have a human thinking he's playing it!

You pass a shabby white cottage. The front door is ajar. Now you've stopped. The overlords have stopped playing with you. At least it seems so. You'd like to go into the cottage and see what's there.

*Do you try to enter the cottage?*

*Or stay still and not risk attracting attention?*

It's a tough call. If I were the U.A.'s avatar, I'd want to see what's in the cottage. That's what I'd advise: Try to find out what's inside; except suppose the overlords notice that you're moving by yourself: From their point of view, the game would be having a malfunction. You could be deleted with a click of one of their big pudgy fingers. (I don't know if they have big pudgy fingers — I'm just guessing.)

It's probably best for you to play it safe and not move on your own. You stand motionless, but, after a while, you realize that you're not moving — you don't have the power to move! You're frozen in time. At least it seems that way—such things happen. But thankfully it's not as if the seemingly real person that is you is frozen in time. It's just you as an avatar. The seemingly real you has escaped from the U.A.'s control. You know this has happened because you are back in what you think of as real life, except that you're not in control of your own will. Some force is tugging at you, moving you toward the kitchen, making you feel like you want a snack.

You feel anticipatory pleasure.

Just as good and bad things can happen in a computer simulation as in real life (if there is a real life, and we — all of us — aren't living in a computer simulation and aren't able to say anything about real life), it's in seemingly real life and not in a computer simulation that you have reached the kitchen. You open the fridge door, or the overlords have caused you to open the fridge door.

*Hmmm.* Leftover chocolate layer cake. You take it out and have a bite. You smile. It may only be simulated chocolate layer cake, but it tastes real.

## #8

### You Die and Go to Heaven

You lived a good life and tried to be a good person and regretted your moral failings. You may not have followed whatever special religious ritual would swing wide the pearly gates, but it turns out that the rules are looser than you had feared they would be. Within a short slice of eternity after you died, you found yourself in . . . *What else could it be when you're walking on a cloud, and all the souls you see have beneficent smiles on their androgynous faces, and you hear lovely music, except a bit heavy on the harps, and you're gliding along— no need for a tedious succession of lifting one foot off the ground, and then the other, and then the other . . .*

It is indeed pleasant, and I won't go on about it here. You haven't felt this cheerful in a long time, if ever. . . until you think about tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow, which was said about life on Earth by a famous character after he'd had a particularly bad day, but it occurs to you that it might be applicable to anyone's afterlife as well.

*Assuming that you would be admitted, which you are aware is doubtful, would you want to go to heaven when you die?*

If you need some guidance before answering this question, you might be interested to know that Emily Dickinson visited heaven when she was still alive and what she thought about it:

Almost contented  
I could be  
'Mong such unique  
Society.

#9

**You Are About to Die But Can Have  
a Second Life as an Animal.**

Had not for each of us the ball of the great cosmic roulette wheel fallen in the slot marked *homo sapiens*, we might have been born as members of a non-human species. We're lucky we aren't cockroaches or some such unpleasant even-to-think-about creature.

In my Choose Your Own Adventure book *You Are a Shark*, I imagined that you the reader were successively one of several animal species. (This was written before I'd heard of Thomas Nagel's famous essay "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?")

To whatever extent one can imagine what it's like to be another species (not much, Nagel says), thinking about this might make one appreciate being human. The lives of most members of other species are not enviable. Imagine being a member of a herd of impalas, one or two of which are picked off by lions every few nights. It's best, generally, to be at the top of the food chain. That was true before humans came along, at least. Early humans risked going hungry a lot, but they didn't have to worry as much about predators as impalas do unless they were juveniles or well past prime, though they faced other perils, for instance, snakes, disease-bearing insects, and each other.

*If you were about to die and had the option to be reborn as an animal, would you give it a try, assuming that you could choose the species of animal you would be? If so, what would that be?*

I would be tempted to accept this offer if I could be an animal that has certain wonderful experiences that a human can never have. I'd be willing to risk being an eagle, or an albatross, or an orca, or even a sperm whale and see what it's like to dive down half a mile and battle a giant squid.

Maybe I'll backtrack on that. I wouldn't want to have been Moby Dick. Marine mammals have to worry about humans



hunting them, ships mowing them down, choking on plastics, drinking polluted water and enduring human-made noise.

Ever since humans arrived on the scene, they have been killing and abducting animals, enslaving them, breeding them to their liking, and driving untold numbers of species into extinction. It would seem better, as a general principle, to be an animal living in prehuman times. Are there exceptions? I've known dogs that had a pretty cushy life. Champion racehorses in retirement are said to live well. When I was in the Navy, I watched dolphins riding the bow wave of the ship I was on. They were having a fine time. Elephants may, on average, be more thoughtful than humans. If I were an animal, I'd want to be a lucky one.

## #10

### **You Are Aging Backward, but No One Else Is.**

Here's the Miracle Wizard again. The last thing he would ever do is ask how things are going for you, or how your family is, or talk about the weather. As usual, he jumps right in:

“If you tell me to wave my wand, you'll start growing younger at the same rate that you and everyone else have been growing older. Before you decide if you want to do this, there are certain aspects of this condition I want you to be aware of. You may have seen the movie, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*. If so, I don't want you to be confused by it. The title character in the movie was born having all the features of an old man, and he aged backward throughout his life. He'd never had a prior life, so he'd had no prior experience even though he looked as if he had. In your case, if you accept my offer to age backward, you'll retain all the memory and possess all the skills and knowledge that you've acquired during your present life. As you grow younger, the gap between your years of experience and those of everyone else your age will increase at the rate of two years per year because each year you grow a year younger, you gain a year's experience, and the people you become contemporary with are all a year younger than the ones you were contemporary with the previous year, so, on average, they will have had a year's less experience than the ones you were contemporary with the previous year. To the extent that experience imparts wisdom, you will grow increasingly wise at a rapid rate compared to everyone else who is biologically the same age you are in any particular year. Neat, don't you think?

“And keep in mind, you won't be retracing the life you lived in reverse. If, let's say, you broke a leg at one point in your life, there's no reason to think you'll break it again when you've retro-aged to the age when it happened. But that doesn't mean your life will be risk free. You might not have broken a leg last time, but break it this time.

*You feel anxious, trying to think this through. If you go along with it, you'll get younger at the same rate at which you got*

*older from the time you were born. Take your age right now and count all the way back to a few months before you were born. At that point, you'll be too young to survive outside the womb, and that's when you'll die if you haven't died sooner during the years when you were getting younger. How do you feel about this? Would you be glad to have aging backward happen to you?*

If you are, say, about ten years old, you wouldn't be happy at this prospect. In two or three years you'll be considerably smaller and weaker. Your reading and math scores will be way above average for your biological age — maybe off the charts — but you'll be too puny for your former friends, who are now about twelve or thirteen, and your new seven-year-old contemporaries will likely seem like the childish little kids they are even though they're the same size you are.

If you're in your nineties, like me, this is a completely different situation. Getting steadily younger will be a welcome development. Instead of being in terminal decline, you can expect many decades of increasing physical capability and continuing progress in your career. Think how much more life and work experience you'll have had!

If all goes well, you'll eventually have retro-aged long enough so that you'll be a teenager again (though you won't think like one), followed by slipping into pre-teen years and having diminishing options. You'll lose your driver's license because you can no longer see over the steering wheel and your feet can't reach the pedals. Sooner than you'd like, you'll face the dismaying future of the retro-aging ten-year-old mentioned above.

Even while you're still in your prime, your situation will be problematical. Tensions are bound to arise as your spouse or partner ages at the same rate you are retro-aging. Your continuing chronological divergence with your former contemporaries is likely to distance you from close friends, a process that will become more pronounced every year. You will lose a valuable bond with others because you won't share with them the common experience of aging. By the time you're a teenager, your old friends may find you too young-looking to tolerate. The final year or two will be comparable to the dementia you might suffer in old age. Who will take care of you? Not your parents or uncles or aunts —

they will have died long before you retro-aged into being a little kid.

Despite these limitations, for a lot of people, retro-aging, like forward aging, could be good while it lasts.

## #11

### **Risking Everything To Get Set Up for Life**

Because of some mysterious transformation, you find that you are twenty years old and about to finish your sophomore year in college. You're in excellent physical condition and feeling psychically well balanced and reasonably happy, but you're apprehensive about what career you'll pursue and about the large student debt you've run up, and you're apprehensive about your future generally. You happen to be mulling over these challenges when the Miracle Wizard appears, unannounced, as usual. You weren't expecting him, but you're not surprised when the first thing he says is:

"I have a spectacular deal for you!"

"Really," you say, trying not to sound as skeptical as you feel.

"No need to go for it if you don't want to," the Wiz says.

"Maybe you're not interested in hearing what it is."

"I am. Please go ahead," you say.

"This would involve dropping out of college for a year or two, but the payoff is tremendous. It will get you totally set up for life."

"Really?"

"Really. An incredibly rich donor will finance all your expenses, and if you complete your assignment within two years, he'll pay you ten million dollars."

This makes you more skeptical than ever. "What's the assignment?" you ask.

"Actually, there are four possibilities. You can pick whichever one you want, agreeing to complete it in less than two years. All you have to do is choose which assignment you prefer, and you'll be on your way to earning ten million dollars!"

"I'm listening," you say warily.

"Here are your options:"

**"First:** Sail around the world single-handed making only four stops of no more than one week each to get resupplied and make repairs or replace equipment as necessary. In the course of your voyage you'll have to travel about thirty

thousand nautical miles. The donor will provide you with a fully equipped, state of the art, thirty-six-foot overall length, twenty-seven-foot waterline length, sloop with self-steering capability and all supplies and provisions needed for getting underway and whatever you need at reprovisioning stops. He'll also provide you with six-months intensive training in ocean sailing and navigating by top experts before you set out. Many people have accomplished such a voyage, including ones in boats much less well-equipped and supplied as yours will be. There are risks, of course, for example, storms that no boat this size could survive, being run down by a large ship, falling overboard, being attacked by pirates, going off course and hitting a reef, becoming seriously ill or injured with no medical assistance available, and colliding with debris, like an empty shipping container as happened to the character Robert Redford played in his solo sailing trip in the movie *All Is Lost*. In the best of circumstances, this voyage will be physically and emotionally demanding.

**“Second:** Ride a bicycle (pedal power only) from Prudhoe Bay, Alaska, on the Arctic Ocean to Ushuaia, Argentina, on the Strait of Magellan, almost at the southern tip of South America, a distance of about ninety-five hundred miles. Your trip will be fully financed, including the cost of a top-of-the-line mountain bike, spare tires and replacement parts, camping gear and food supplies. Before you set out, you'll be given three months of rigorous professional training and physical conditioning at no expense to you. There are risks, of course — being struck by trucks or cars, falling ill or having an accident with no medical assistance available, and, when you're traveling through certain areas, being attacked by robbers and thugs.

**“Third:** Climb Mt. Denali, the highest peak in North America, which rises twenty thousand, three hundred feet above sea level and involves a thirteen-thousand-foot elevation gain from base camp. As with your other options, all expenses will be paid by the donor, including rigorous six-months aerobic and high-altitude training and preparation in mountaineering skills, plus the services of a professional guide who will accompany you on your climb to the top. Fortunately, you'll be able to carry a supply of oxygen with you — you may need it as you approach the summit. There are risks, of course, Fifty percent of those who attempt to reach Denali's

summit turn back along the way. Some never make it back to base camp. Perils include avalanches, falls, hypothermia, dehydration, altitude sickness, and physical and mental exhaustion.

**“Fourth:** It’s unlikely that this final option will be as physically demanding as the first three, but it’s less clear what’s involved, and, like the others, it’s not risk-free. It came about because the incredibly rich donor who is offering you these choices is concerned about the ongoing destruction of the Amazon rainforest. He would like to get an inside look at conditions there by having an agent embedded in the Kayapo tribe. The tribe looks favorably upon him because he supplied them with a medicine they desperately needed. They asked what they could do for him in return. He requested that they let a friend live with them for a year and learn their language. The friend would not have any special status, but would live just as if he or she were one of them.

“If you take on this assignment, you will be that ‘friend’ and live with the Kayapo people for an entire year. You’ll have three months advance special training including learning the rudiments of the Kayapo language before you move in with them. As is the case with the other assignments that you have a chance to take on, all your expenses will be paid by the incredibly rich donor. During the year living with the Kayapo, you’ll have no contact with the outside world, but the donor will try to help you leave safely after your year of residency ends.

“Whichever assignment you take on, you must agree that you are attempting it at your own risk and that you’ll complete it within two years from the time your training begins. Your ten-million-dollar award will be paid upon completion of the assignment. If you fail to complete it within two years, you get nothing. And by the way, in none of these assignments can you quit and come back and try again later.

*Do you tell the Wiz that you’ll take on one of these four assignments? If so, which one?*

If I’d had this chance after my sophomore year in college, I would have jumped at it, and the prospect would be even

more attractive today because of advances in technical equipment.

I think you'll agree with me that the best decision wouldn't necessarily turn on which activity you prefer among sailing, biking, mountain climbing, or living with a primitive rainforest tribe. Other factors to consider are how long it would take to complete your assignment, how much risk of death or serious injury there is, and how much risk there is that you couldn't complete the assignment, in which case you would have lost a year or two of college with no improvement in your finances.

That's one way of looking at this offer. But whichever assignment you choose, even if you quit after completing only part of it, you'll have great training and a wonderful life experience, one that would have been over-the-top expensive if you'd had to pay for it yourself. In all four possible cases, it's bound to be educational — like taking a great course in meeting challenges, developing skills, and getting immersed in nature in a way that you never would have otherwise.

Climbing Denali would be the easiest of these to complete in a relatively short space of time, even including six months of rigorous training and conditioning. Keep in mind, though, that the risk of having to turn back and losing the chance to make ten million dollars is probably the greatest for this one.

Biking from Prudhoe Bay to the southern tip of South America could take over a year including training and preparation.

Sailing around the world could take well over a year, including training and outfitting and four weeks spent for provisioning stops. Fear of loneliness or vulnerability might be a deciding factor. On the upside, most of your time would be spent in a relaxed state, with plenty of time for reading or listening to audio books and contemplating the wonders of the sea and the sky.

I would guess risk of death to be roughly the same in all four ventures, and all four would be over-the-top great life experiences, each worth embarking upon even if you weren't making ten million dollars. I suggest that you accept the Wiz's offer, following your instincts as to which assignment to take on. Personally, I would try to climb Denali and hope I wouldn't be among the fifty percent who don't make it to the top.



## #12

### **You Are Still Alive and Feeling Fine Even Though You're 125.**

Imagine what your life would be like if you were still alive and have reached the age of 125. You're the oldest person in the world, and the next oldest is only 117. You are able to walk with a cane and engage in interesting conversations, your mental faculties are intact, and you don't look a day over 110.

You reside in an assisted living facility. Your hearing isn't good enough to enjoy music, and your eyes tire if you read for more than a few minutes at a time. You have to be helped getting into and out of the rocking chair where you spend most of your time. All your contemporaries are dead. You have no spouse or partner. All your progeny are dead or can't be located except for your great grand-daughter, Eliza, who visits you a couple of times a year.

You are barely aware — and hardly care — that you're an international sensation. Doctors, physiologists, and other specialists want to study you. They want to solve the mystery of how you've been able to live so long. They offer to pay you to cooperate with them. Not that you need the money. You're making a lot from product endorsements — the cereal you eat, and everything about you, it seems, even the brand of gin you used for making martinis before you quit for good on your 120th birthday.

All this attention is nice in a way, but rather waring. Eminent doctors who have examined you say that your heart is weakening, you are maxed out on medications, and you are too frail to survive a transplant. They say there's no chance you'll live to be 130.

*Would it be worth it to live this long and experience what it would be like? Or would it be an exercise in masochism? I didn't mention it earlier, but the Wiz has given you the option of taking a pill — no pain involved — and you'll be out of here.*

\*

\*

I would say, "Give me the pill," except it occurs to me that doctors might be able to learn something about the aging process by continuing to study me. My extremely rare case might offer clues that would lead to effective treatments to slow aging. If I can be a useful subject for scientific study, it would inject meaning in my life.

In your case, there's your great grand-daughter, Eliza. Her visits must be high spots in your life, and probably in hers too. Maybe you can provide inspiration to her and have a positive effect on her life. Come to think of it, maybe you can have a positive effect on the lives of people who take care of you. And, of course, that would go for me too if I were in your position. That's reason enough to hang on longer. If you have a purpose in life, it's worth living no matter how old you are. You see:

An aged man is but a paltry thing  
A tattered coat upon a stick  
Unless soul clap its hands  
And sing and louder sing  
For every tatter in its mortal dress.\*

---

\* from "Sailing to Byzantium"  
W. B. Yeats

## #13

### **Comfortably Ensnared in a Space Capsule, You Start Falling Upward, Accelerating at the Same Rate as You Would in Free Fall.**

If you have the misfortune to fall out of an airplane without a parachute, were it not for air resistance, you would fall at an accelerating rate of about 22 miles an hour faster each second than the previous second. This means that you would be falling at about 22 miles per hour at the end of the first second, 44 miles per hour at the end of the second second, and 66 miles per hour at the end of the third second, about the same rate of acceleration that's achieved by high-priced sports cars.

We're constantly "trying" to fall at this accelerating rate toward the center of the Earth, but we're kept in place by the Earth's surface or something on it, so our experience is of feeling weight (1G). If we were in free fall, we'd feel weightless.

If just by falling, you can accelerate from zero to sixty in three seconds, it's not hard to imagine a spaceship taking off from Earth, and, thanks to being equipped with nuclear fusion or some such exotic method of propulsion, keep accelerating at that rate, not just for three seconds, but for hours, days, and weeks. All that time, if you were in this spaceship, because you're accelerating at 1G, you'd feel that you weigh the same as you do sitting in a chair on Earth, except that, depending on the ship's interior design, you might feel your weight against your back instead of against your feet or the seat of your space suit.

Continuing to accelerate at 1G, it would take about two-and-a-half hours to pass the moon. This would be equivalent to a sports car accelerating from zero to 195,000 miles per hour in the same amount of time.

Still accelerating at 1G, you would pass the orbit of Neptune (roughly 2.7 billion miles from Earth) in eleven days. By then, you'd be traveling at about 5,750 miles per second, which is about three percent of the speed of light.

For reasons that Einstein could have told you about, but I can't, as you build up such tremendous speed, maintaining

this rate of acceleration becomes increasingly difficult. I'm wildly guessing that reaching more than, say, seven percent of light speed would be the limit of future human capability. Assuming that you could keep accelerating at 1G until you reached such a dazzling velocity, even if you could maintain it indefinitely, it would take about sixty years to reach Proxima Centura, the nearest star to the sun. This star appears to have at least three planets. It would be nice to land on the most attractive of them. It's not likely to have breathable air, but you could open the hatch, and keeping your space suit on and fully secure, stretch and walk around and admire the scenery, which you can be sure would be thrilling to behold.

A technical problem to be dealt with on this fantastic journey is that you would have to start slowing down when the planet you're planning to visit is billions of miles ahead of you. This will delay your arrival time by several years. Otherwise, you'd go by so fast you'd only see a blurry streak.

## #14

### **You Don't Know When You'll Die, But You Can Choose How You'll Die.**

Unless you're in unusual circumstances, you don't know when or how you're going to die. You probably don't want to know. But suppose, though you don't know when you'll die, you can choose how you'll die.

*What way would you choose?*

Not toughing it out while enduring terrible pain or discomfort, let's hope. Much better is to die mercifully sedated in a hospice. I had an elderly relative who had known death was coming and died peacefully in a hospital bedroom with his family gathered about him. That's a classic way to go. Better, however, in my opinion, is the route taken by my maternal grandmother. In failing health, she took a big swig of sherry and lay down for a nap from which she never woke up. Well done, Grandma, I thought afterward.

Only years later I asked myself how I could be so sure that Grandma died peacefully. How could I know that she didn't have an episode of pain and anguish before she expired? That's possible, but I think it's more likely that she had no conscious experience in the time preceding her death.

Having brushed away this fear about grandma, I think dying unexpectedly in your sleep is best. You're relieved of the grim expectation of oncoming death and whatever emotional distress may come from contemplating it. From the perspective of everyone close who survives you, your death is a shock no matter how you die and probably more so if you die suddenly and unexpectedly. At a minimum, it's upsetting. Besides sheer grief that those closest to you may feel, there is a lot of other stuff they have to deal with: condolences and acknowledgements of condolences, administrative chores, funerals or memorial gatherings, dealing with personal property, readjustments of plans, in some cases disruption of whole lives, and a feeling of loss that may linger for years.

The aftermath of one's death can be very burdensome for others, but from the perspective of the deceased, sudden death never happens. I would be happy to outwit death in this fashion. That I had checked out and wouldn't be checking in again might be distressing for others, but it wouldn't be for me.

## #15

### **You Are About to Die, but Have the Option of Living as a Character of Your Choice in a Novel that Has Become Real: The Events Described in It Are Actually Happening.**

You are shocked to learn that you have almost no time to live. You can hardly think straight, but the Wiz has made you an offer of continuing life as a fictional character made real, and that's worth considering. Closing your eyes to concentrate, you try to recall the name of a character in a novel you'd be willing to be if the events in it had become real.

Rarely does a novel follow a character through from birth to death. We usually only learn what happened during an eventful period of the protagonist's life. Two famous novels come to mind, James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, that chronicled the lives, respectively, of Leopold Bloom and of Clarissa Dalloway through a single day. So maybe I should pose my question this way:

*Imagine that you are living the life of a character in a novel. Knowing what happened to that character in the time-frame of the novel, and imagining what happened to him or her before and after that time-frame, is there a character in a novel you've read whose life you think would be worth living?*

The literary character I have most affection for is Huckleberry Finn. In the case of Mark Twain's novel, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, it's not hard for me to imagine Huck's early childhood before the narrative begins and what his life might have been like after it ends. At the end of the narrative, Huck and Jim part ways, and Huck lights out for "the territory" (possibly Oklahoma and beyond). I recall that someone published a novel a few years ago imagining what happened to Huck in the ensuing years. I wouldn't want to read it — I doubt if it describes Huck's later life the way I would. Not that there's a correct way! A wide variety of possible futures lay ahead of him after he left us on the last page of the Mark Twain's book.

Instead of being Huckleberry Finn, I might choose to be Ishmael in Herman Melville's novel *Moby Dick*. Ishmael had an

incomparable adventure and lived to tell about it. Another possibility I considered is Pierre, a principal character in Tolstoy's novel *War and Peace*. which I first read about seventy years ago. I had remembered only that Pierre is a good-hearted fellow and gets in on a lot of the action, so he seemed like a promising candidate, but rereading the book last summer, I was reminded how impulsive, naive, and easily manipulated he is.

Early in the book, Pierre inherits an enormous fortune. Unsurprisingly, becoming fabulously rich does not bring him happiness. Over the course of hundreds of pages, he seeks release from anxiety in "philanthropy, dissipation, freemasonry, heroic feats of self-sacrifice, romantic love, and the 'path of thought.'" It takes being captured by the French, incarcerated in miserable circumstances, witnessing an execution, and almost being executed himself for him to appreciate the empowering benefit of simple goodness, though that alone doesn't quite do it. As the book nears its end, he has entered into what appears to be a reasonably happy marriage, but he still seems to be searching for psychic self-satisfaction.

Rereading this sprawling novel, I felt sympathy for Pierre and even some admiration, and would probably prefer to continue living as him rather than be dead, but I'd want to find a character in a novel with whom I feel more simpatico.

I had read *A Farewell To Arms*, by Ernest Hemingway, a few years ago and remembered enough about it to think that the hero / narrator of this novel, Frederic Henry, might be a character come to life that I would be willing to be. I read it again last summer to make sure. Like Hemingway, Frederic Henry was an American and an ambulance driver in Italy during World War I, the period when the novel is set. Henry had been commissioned as a *tenente*, a lieutenant, in the Italian Army. He is wounded, and he and a beautiful, witty, and wonderfully spirited nurse named Catherine fall in love with each other. Henry quickly recovers from his wounds and has some thrillingly described adventures, including — to escape pursuers — jumping into a swiftly flowing river and almost drowning before grabbing hold of a log as he is swept downstream. Later, with the ever so wonderful and beautiful Catherine as a passenger and sustained only by occasional swigs of brandy, he rows a boat thirty-five miles through rough waters on a long lake on a dark and stormy night to get himself and Catherine across the Swiss border so he won't be shot for deserting the Italian Army. Once settled in Switzerland, Frederic's and Catherine's life together becomes so over-the-



top idyllic that one senses that things will go very badly before the book ends, and they do, but our hero survives unscathed, and by then I was so imbued with the Hemingway ethos that I would be ready to be this guy if the Wiz said that I could be after I die. Except maybe not, because, although Frederic Henry's liver is apparently intact when the book ends, I don't think it will be much longer, given the amount of brandy (cognac), whisky, martinis, and great variety of wines he has consumed at a rate averaging about two drinks per page and, in view of the story's tragic dénouement, seems likely to increase after Hemingway finished writing about him. So here I am, not sure of *any* character I'd like to be. I'd have to ask the Wiz to give me time to read more novels, hoping to find the right one.

I imagine that most women, given a similar chance, would prefer to be a female character. There may be an even wider range of exemplary female than male characters in literature — Shakespeare alone created some of the wisest and wittiest I've encountered. My guess is that a popular choice among women for the purposes of this thought experiment would be Elizabeth Bennet, the protagonist of Jane Austen's novel, *Pride and Prejudice*. Elizabeth and her family would be categorized as early 19th century upper class members of the landed gentry in England, a milieu too constrained and insulated to appeal many modern readers, but one not lacking in its charms and accommodating almost the full range of human drama.

Elizabeth's father had inherited a manor and agricultural lands that yielded a comfortable income, but because this estate was entailed, keeping it in his family required his having a male heir. Mr. Bennet was a young man when he married, and it seemed unlikely that this would be a problem, but one after another, every child born to him and Mrs. Bennet was a girl until there were five or them with no prospect of more children to come. Mr. Bennet had not prepared for such an eventuality, and it seemed likely that upon his death the family would lose their estate and its income and they would have little to live on. It became imperative that suitable husbands for the Bennet girls be found!

Elizabeth is the second oldest and by far the most impressive of the lot in character and intellect. Life for her does not go smoothly. (How could it for the protagonist in a great novel?) But her performance in finding her way through the thickets of gentile country life is phenomenal. It would be exhilarating being Elizabeth Bennet brought to life: "Her temper

was to be happy.” “She was not formed for ill-humor.” Her philosophy was to “think only of the past as its remembrance gives you pleasure.” Her father, speaking of “her lively talents,” warned her that they “would place you in the greatest danger in an unequal marriage.”

Not that she never erred! As a result of her misapprehensions, she experienced painful recognition that she had “prided herself on her discernment,” “acted despicably,” “gratified her vanity,” “courted prepossession and ignorance,” and “driven reason away.”

But how often her wisdom shines through! An example is her observation that, “without scheming to do wrong, or to make others unhappy, there may be error, and there may be misery. Thoughtlessness, want of attention to other people’s feelings, and want of resolution, will do the business.”

When the haughty and imperious Lady Catherine de Brough tries to bully Elizabeth into declining the expected offer of marriage on the part of Lady Catherine’s nephew, Elizabeth meets her every argument, threat, and imprecation with élan:

“Has he, has my nephew made you an offer of marriage?”

“Your ladyship has declared it to be impossible!”

“It ought to be; it must be so, while he retains the use of his reason. But your arts and allurements may, in a moment of infatuation, have made him forget what he owes to himself and his family. You may have drawn him in.”

“If I have, I shall be the last person to confess it.”

At this point, this grande dame of the Cotswolds admonishes our heroine: “Ms. Bennet . . . do not expect to be noticed by his family or friends, if you willfully act against the inclinations of all. You will be censured, slighted, and despised by everyone connected with him. Your alliance will be a disgrace; your name will never even be mentioned by any of us.”

“These are heavy misfortunes,” replied Elizabeth. “But the wife of Mr. Darcy must have such extraordinary sources of happiness necessarily attached to her situation that she could, upon the whole, have no cause to repine.”

Nor should any woman, I imagine, who chooses to have her next life be that of Elizabeth Bennet.

## #16

### **What Would You Say if You Could Talk to Your Earlier Self When You Were at a Much Younger Age?**

The Wiz tells you that you can spend half an hour with your earlier self. He warns you that you will not be allowed to tell your earlier self about anything that happened in your past (your earlier self's future) and that you should think carefully about what you're going to say.

*Would you take advantage of this opportunity? If so, at what age would it be best for your earlier self to be when the two of you meet? And what would you say to your earlier self?*

If Wiz offered me this opportunity, my reaction would be: What a great chance to steer my earlier self onto a better course! I wondered if the best age to receive this counsel would be when I was twelve and undergoing an extensive period of debilitating anxiety. Despite my mental instability, I might have been receptive to wise counsel then, but it would probably have been more efficacious to have had such a talk when I was more mature and worldly, most likely when I was starting college.

I may be deluding myself, but I think it would have had a hugely beneficial effect if the self I was as a college freshman could have grasped a few basic precepts. Given a chance to impart them to my former self, I would print them neatly on a sheet of paper and hand it to him. "Hang on to this checklist," I'd say, "and refer to it from time-to-time."

## CHECKLIST

True self-confidence and inner strength requires honesty and compassion.

Wise decision making requires consideration of possible consequences of your actions or inaction.

Resistance to destructive impulses requires personal integrity.

“What you want, above all things, on a raft, is for everybody to be satisfied, and feel right and kind toward the others.”

Huck Finn

## #17

### **Turning Back the Clock and Living Life Forward from When You Were Much Younger**

Better than letting you talk to yourself when you were younger, the Wiz just told you that you can turn the clock back to a pivotal point in your life and start living your life over from then on, for example, from when you're about to start freshman year at college or from when you're starting high school. What an opportunity!

The Wiz emphasized that after you've turned the clock back, you'll still remember everything that happened to you since you were that age in the life you were living before you turned the clock back. He also informed you that, for the most part, what you remember isn't going to happen again even though you'll be living through years that you've lived through already. That's because many of the coincidences that formed your experiences — the situations in which you found yourself, the interactions you had with people — wouldn't reoccur. It's not just in your personal life that you wouldn't experience identical circumstances and choices you had in the life you've lived already. Random variations are so pervasive in the progression of events that the personal lives of everyone on Earth would diverge increasingly from how they played out during the same period in your life that you lived through before. You would no doubt be wiser than you were because of your experience in having lived through years of your life before, but many of the situations in which you'd find yourself and the choices you'd have to make would be very different.

Even if you feel that you could live a more satisfying life this time, you might not choose to accept the Wiz's offer, because you wouldn't have married the person you did and had the kids you had — it would be as if they never existed except in your memory, and you wouldn't want that. If considerations of that sort aren't applicable, you'd almost certainly want to turn the clock back, because, being younger after you did so, you'd instantly have a longer life expectancy, and there's a good chance that it would be a

better quality life because of the experience and wisdom you gained during the life you lived earlier.

*Given the circumstances that the Wiz laid out and your personal situation, would you turn your clock back, and, if so, to what point in your life would you turn it back to? How do you think what you gained in knowledge and understanding in the life you lived before would affect your attitude and decision making when you're living through years of your life a second time?*

Something I would consider before I would accept the Wiz's offer is the enormous role that luck plays in life, and how sometimes, through some misfortune, the right decision may set one on a path to adversity, and the wrong decision may open up opportunities that one wouldn't have had otherwise. I made some awful decisions that I wouldn't want to repeat, but one or two of them set me on a path on which, along the way, I had some exceedingly good luck that there's no reason to believe I would have had if I'd made the right decisions and found myself in different circumstances. Starting over, because of my experience in having lived a previous life, I surely would be wiser, but it's doubtful that I would be as lucky, and firmly lodged in my mind is the observation by the great New York Yankees pitcher Lefty Gomez: "I'd rather be lucky than good."

It's impossible to know, but I'm sure that, second time around, there would be both correspondences with, and divergences from, the life I've lived so far. I might have gone to a different college than I did the first time I was that age, and I certainly would have taken some different courses. It's likely I would have majored in philosophy instead of in public and international affairs. Both are excellent courses of study for preparing to go to law school, but there are innumerable reasons why I wouldn't have gone to law school this time. What made me decide to do that in the first place? The quick answer is that my older brother, Dick, went to law school and that seemed like a good enough reason for me to do the same. That leaves the question: Why did Dick go to law school? The best answer to that is that my aunt Dorothy married a law professor, and he influenced Dick. The law professor had a brother who was a biology professor. Suppose my aunt Dorothy had married the biology

professor? After turning the clock back, rather than majoring in philosophy or public and international affairs, it's possible that I would have majored in biology. You can't make assumptions about how the years you'd be living over again will turn out, or even about what kind of person you will be.

You have probably thought of things you would have done differently, if you'd had the knowledge and insights you have now. It might help heighten your awareness of what kind of person you are and how you've changed over the years to consider what they are. I feel as if I'm a whole different person than I was "back then." Who was that fumbling bumbling character? I don't feel I even know him, much less was him, because, when I was him, I didn't know myself.

If the Wiz offered me this chance to turn the clock back, I might be too curious about how my second-chance life would progress to turn it down. That's true even though it's unlikely that in this second life I'd still be alive by the time I reached the age I am now. You need above average luck to live to be ninety-two.

## #18

### **Imagine that What John Lennon Imagined in His Song “Imagine” Happened.**

I’ve been thinking about John Lennon’s iconic song “Imagine.” Consider for the moment what it would be like if certain things referred to in the lyrics were, as Lennon imagined, absent from our culture and our polity, most notably: “religion,” “countries,” and “possessions.”

*Do you think the world would be better off if what John Lennon imagined had happened?*

I don’t think that religions, countries, or possessions are the problem. One could argue that it’s the character of the people who have *possessions*, the character of the *countries*, and the character of the *religions* as they are practiced that matters. Greed, religious dogmatism, and extreme nationalism have caused a lot of problems in the world — maybe most of them — but if everyone had the right state of mind, having possessions, being religious, and loving one’s country wouldn’t be a problem.

That said, I don’t mean to be dismissive of the spirit of John Lennon’s song. He was thinking along the same lines as Gonzalo, a venerable character in Shakespeare’s final play, *The Tempest*. Gonzalo revealed his idea of a better world:

I’ the commonwealth I would by contraries  
Execute all things; for no kind of traffic  
Would I admit; no name of magistrate;  
Letters should not be known; riches, poverty,  
And use of service, none . . .  
No occupation; all men idle, all,  
And women too, but innocent and pure;  
No sovereignty —

Gonzalo was even more dreamily idealistic than John Lennon, imagining a society where no one has to work and courts and judges would not be needed to administer justice.



But Gonzalo would be more conventional than Lennon in allowing possessions, so long as no one is either rich or impoverished.

There's no point in trying to think how either Lennon's or Gonzalo's societies could work in practice. Neither of them is a serious prescription for restructuring societies. Rather, they express the age-old human yearning for a simple, peaceful, equitable society sustained by universal good will, an idealized civilization in which we are all spared the strictures of the law, the harsh rivalries of nations, tribes and factions, the cruel disparities that emerge in the progression of events, and the raw imprint of warped religious and secular doctrines on our lives.

## #19

### **Would you Rather Have Your Brain Uploaded into a Special Purpose Super Computer than Be Dead?**

You are about to die, but the Wiz says that you can avoid death if you're willing to accept this offer. He says that, in his opinion, existing in this computer is superior to luxurious solitary confinement (thought experiment #5). You will be physically isolated, it's true, but you'll have a multiplicity of interrelationships with other brains — ones in artificially intelligent computers and ones in human heads. You'll have plenty of input — full internet access, for example — and you won't be degraded by aging. You'll get increasingly skilled, learned, and capable. You'll be a valuable asset to humanity. You'll have no physical desires. You'll dine exclusively on electricity. You won't need to get out and move around. And because you are such an extraordinary phenomenon, you'll be perfectly comfortable and get lots of supportive attention.

You will, of course, be tremendously intelligent — above genius level in some respects, in large part because you'll benefit from extraordinary connectivity with other minds and computers. You'll have tremendous intellectual stimulation. Your life will be far richer than that of most people who have ever lived. The downside is that you'll be deprived of physical sensations and experiences. Activities that most humans take for granted won't be available. You'll have only a poignant memory of what it's like to walk or run or dance or do innumerable things that average humans can do.

*Would you find it tolerable, or even enjoyable or stimulating, to have your brain uploaded into a special purpose computer? Would you rather have that happen than be dead? If you had been born that way — if your consciousness had emerged in a computer — would that make life more tolerable than if you had a personal memory of having lived in a body and as a result found yourself ruefully reflecting from time to time on what bodies can do and you can't?*

\*

\*

In a way, we are already confined in a very small place — in our heads. When you experience something like the thrill of gripping a tennis racket and swinging your arm in a graceful arc and seeing the ball clear the net and strike a white line as your opponent scrambles futilely to reach it, all that joyous sensation of physicality and psychological uplift is happening in your head. Still, it seems doubtful that thrilling sensations that can be experienced on the tennis court or on the dance floor, or even the agreeable sensation of walking down the street, can be replicated in one's disembodied brain.

Maybe some of those sensations that require the senses, including the kinesthetic sense, can be artificially generated the way hallucinations are in people whose brains are supplying them without input from sensory organs. When I'm barely waking up in a dark room with my eyes still closed, I've experienced visual hallucinations that, though not spectacular, are remarkable: I see textures in what seem to be walls that surround me. Sometimes they resemble the walls in my bedroom, except that they are covered with wallpaper; sometimes they have intricate designs that my brain has created, though I couldn't possibly produce them when I'm in a conscious, open-eyed state. Occasionally, as I'm waking up, I "see" that I'm in a cavern with walls that look like stucco.

As I imagine is the case with most people, my hallucinatory powers are extremely limited. I can't make vivid images appear, nor can I make them disappear except by opening my eyes and letting light break the spell. Oliver Sacks, in his fascinating book *Hallucinations* (2013), describes a great variety of hallucinations, many of them far more wide-ranging than I've experienced. Sacks says that some people can hear music playing "in which every note in a piece, every instrument in an orchestra, is distinctly heard."\*

That must be an interesting experience for them, and the life you would have if your brain is uploaded into the Wiz's computer would be much richer than that. Nonetheless, if you decide to take a chance on uploading your brain into a computer — even one provided by the Miracle Wizard — don't count on replicating physical experiences that embodied people like us tend to take for granted.

Would a strictly intellectual life suffice? For people like me, and probably you, it's hard to see how it would, but for the super brain you would be if you were a brain in this computer, it might be all you want or need. Someone once

asked Bobbie Fischer, the chess genius, “Do you think life is like chess?” He replied, “Life *is* chess.” Since a brain in a computer is capable of playing championship chess, Fischer might have been satisfied being one. Without the distractions of physical life, he might be able to beat not only all the grandmasters, but the best chess-playing computers as well. As a brain in a computer, if you have the right inputs, connections, and resources, you might function on a level beyond the reach of anyone else in the world. You’d be confined, but you could still have a rich full satisfying life. I would welcome a chance to have that experience, but I’d want to be able to turn myself off.

---

\* Oliver Sacks; *Hallucinations* (2013); P. 67; Vintage Books

## #20

### **You're Living 30,000 Years Ago But Know Everything You Know Now.**

The Wiz told you that it was about to happen, and you know he wasn't kidding when you find yourself, still remembering the life you were living in the twenty-first century, but transported to a cave in France 30,000 years ago. Fortunately, your companions aren't stereotypical dull-witted cave people walking around carrying thick wooden clubs. *Au contraire*. Most of them are pretty sharp. There's an artist in the clan who has been drawing pictures of antelopes on the walls with charcoal. Light from flickering fires make them seem almost real.

You don't have to worry about seeming foreign to the others. You're wearing animal skins like everyone else. The Wiz instantly briefed you on your clan's culture and who everyone is, and made sure you can speak and understand their language, which has become your second language. Everyone regards you as belonging to the clan, and you feel secure because you have a job, in fact two jobs: One is hunting for small game with a bow and arrows of your own making. Your other job is to be a storyteller.

Late in the afternoon you arrived, DeZog, the chief of the clan, takes you aside.

"Hunting and gathering were good today," he says. "Tonight, we feast. Afterwards, I want you to tell a good story."

He grins and gives you a poke in the ribs. It hurts, but you know you shouldn't complain.

*What sort of story will you tell your fellow cave people?*

I would tell of how I met an eagle that had landed on a rock outcropping near me, and to my astonishment started to talk.

I said to it, "I never imagined that an eagle could talk!"

It replied, "I have taken the form of an eagle, but I am not an eagle. I am a prophet."

“A prophet?” I said. “Does that mean you can tell what happens in the future?”

“It does,” said the eagle / prophet. `

“Wonderful,” I said. “Tell, me then, what will happen, not just tomorrow, but after hundreds of lifetimes of winter snows have covered the ground and melted away. Tell me now.”

Then I would say to the people gathered around, “The eagle talked to me for such a long time that I went to sleep listening to it. When I woke up, it was gone, but I could remember every word it said to me, as if everything it had said was what I had known all along.”

Then I would tell about some things that will happen during their future — during the next 30,000 years — and one thing I would say that the eagle told me is that far, far, in the future, people will fly, and they will fly higher and faster and longer than eagles do today, so high and so fast, that some of them would land on the moon.

Because of the extraordinary things I would tell everyone, I might become a legend. The members of my clan might come to think that I was a god. It’s also possible that they would come to think that I was a nut, making up such ridiculous impossible tales.

## #21

### **You're Twenty Years Old, and You Have a Super Advanced A.I. Machine that Can Make the Right Decisions for You Every Time.**

The Wiz really came through for you with this one. He says that your the Super Advanced A.I. Machine (SAAI) he's providing you with is able to fully inform itself, take all facts and circumstances into account, weigh pros and cons, and analyze all possible results in the light of your values and principles, or, to be more precise, in the light of the values and principles it has decided you have after analyzing everything about you so thoroughly that it knows you better than you know yourself.

This unprecedentedly amazing device is, of course, connected to the World-Wide Super General Artificial Intelligence Net and continually upgrades itself and informs you of what you need to know in a millionth of the time it would take hundreds of PhDs to research and reflect on the matter and advise you, and it invariably produces the best possible decision. You won't have to spend energy thinking about anything before acting or deciding not to act. This SAAI machine will do it for you.

"Believe me," the Wiz says, "It won't take long before you've made super smart decisions that you wouldn't have made on your own — you'll see stunning results almost as soon as you start using it. Your SAAI is going to give you a great lift in life.

*What would you do with your SSAI machine? How would you use it?*

If you employ your SAAI in a business setting, you're likely to make a lot of money. It should be useful in everyday life too, for example, in how you spend your spare time, determine what sports, cultural, and social activities to engage in, what romantic relationships to develop, whether to pursue your

studies, travel, engage in politics, or take up some other pursuit.

Wondering where to go on your next vacation? Maybe visit Italy or Greece? Or would you be happier getting in touch with the natural world? How about a canoe trip on the Allagash River in Maine? Maybe you should visit Glacier National Park, in Canada — see the glaciers while they're still there. No need to puzzle over what would be most rewarding: Your SAAI knows best.

It's weird to think about it, but this SAAI is so good that it will make as good or better decisions than you could make on your own every single time you consult it. You could let it make *all* your decisions, knowing that it would never ever go wrong!

*Would you be willing to turn over all decision making to your SAAI?*

I can see how this SAAI might work beautifully for me. Thanks to my incredibly improved decision making, within a few minutes, I'd get a novel I wrote revised to perfection, and within a few more minutes, SAAI would turn out a screenplay based on it that would be destined to be an Oscar-winning movie. I could make a huge amount of money in the stock market. It wouldn't be long before countless little things would be going better for me than could otherwise happen.

That's a nice fantasy, but it's just as likely that I'd feel that something is wrong. I might start wondering why I'm not happier. I might think I could use SAAI for everything, but then realize that doing so would reduce me to being a zombie or a robot because I would only be doing what the SAAI machine told me to do. I wouldn't be a free agent, making my own decisions, which is a requisite of leading a rich, full, satisfying life. To avoid that unappetizing fate, I would probably try to make decisions based on my own reasoning, as one would with the aid of an ordinary computer — keeping my SAAI machine at arm's length and considering in each important instance whether its "correct decision" is or is not right for me. *Except*, wouldn't that lead me back to where I was, groping my way through life, and with the added worry that all the people who are doing what their SAAIs are telling them to do are passing me by?



## #22

### **Checking Out the Scene One Thousand Years in the Future**

“I think you’ll like this one,” the Wiz says. “You’ll live out your present life. I’m not authorized to tell you how long that will be, but I can say that your life expectancy won’t be affected in the slightest by the decision you’re about to make. You must choose now: After you die, you can either stay dead or make an irrevocable choice to resume living at the age you are now (not the age at which you die) one thousand years in the future.”

It sure would be interesting to look around and find out how things are a thousand years from now, sometime after the year 3000. Think how astonished and disoriented you would be if you had died about a thousand years ago — say, in the year 1000 — and rematerialized and looked around today. What a shock that would be. I suspect that it would be even more of a shock to die today and rematerialize a thousand years from now.

*The Wiz has given you the option of rematerializing and regaining consciousness after you die — this awakening to be a thousand years in the future. He promises that you’ll be the same biological age that you are now, that you’ll be in excellent health, and that you’ll have immunity from all pathogens that are then extant; also that you’ll retain a full memory of your past life and that you’ll be in the same geographical area you were in when you died, or, if that happens to be underwater, in the nearest habitable area that isn’t. Would you go for it?*

Speculating about what it would be like to find myself a thousand years in the future reminded me of those cases in which people who have been blind since birth have an operation that allows them to see perfectly. They don’t behold a landscape or interior as people sighted from birth

perceive it, but a blur of colors and shapes. It takes them a long time before their brains can make sense of what those who were never visually impaired take for granted.

It might be beyond the capacity of most of us to make sense of what's going on if we found ourselves living a thousand years from now: It might require skills and understanding that can only be attained if cultivated from an early age. I can't begin to guess what life might be like if A.I.-enabled-robots do everything that people used to do.

*Homo Sapiens* may be extinct, in which case, if you could be transported to that time — to a habitable part of the planet — you might be overwhelmed with sadness at how our species flourished, proliferated, and transformed Earth, eventually causing our technologically dependent civilization to spin out of control, so that you are witness to the end, or the near end, of the human saga. If afterwards, you could return to your own place and time, you might become an activist, doing what you can to set history on a course in which more people act rationally and the course of events plays out more agreeably.

If you were transported to the thirty-first century and looked around, you might find that enough humans had acted sensibly until artificial intelligence got so it could do everything, including maybe some stuff so unexpected that no one can figure out what the grand plan is that the A.I. machines have in mind, and we humble members of the human species aren't even trying to figure it out. If that's how things are a thousand years from now, when you arrive there, you might find that everyone is sitting around doing what looks like nothing from your perspective until it dawns upon you that they are living in virtual reality land.

In his little book *Night Thoughts*, Wallace Shawn tells of reading *The Pillow Book* of Sei Shonagon and of the appeal to him of the life it describes of gentle folk in ancient Japan who seemed to have nothing to do but recline on pillows and write letters and poems to each other. Such a life might be possible once A.I. takes care of everything, but I doubt if Shawn, or any of us, would find it satisfying. Not for long. And, of course, it's far from assured that the course of history will follow such a trajectory. Life in the thirty-first century may consist of misery and little else.

The more I think about it, the more I'm filled with apprehension. I can imagine arriving there, a thousand years in the future, and wanting to get in on the action, or inaction, but it doesn't work out that way. I get to be in future land, but

don't learn anything about future land because it's so different from our own, and there's no chance to decide what you want in these circumstances. Thinking for oneself may not be the way things are done.

There's certainly a risk that you would find yourself in a brutal situation, maybe a lot worse than if you had rematerialized thirty thousand years in the past. The Wiz didn't say whether A.I. machines would rule the Earth, or insects, or bacteria, or whether you might freeze or fry, or experience some other form of immediate, or agonizingly slow, cessation of existence.

It's totally understandable if you decide not to risk being transported to one thousand years in the future. As for me, despite all these weighty considerations and awareness that I may instantly regret it, I'm too curious to see what it's like to say, "Thanks but no thanks." Instead, I'd exclaim: "I'll go for it, Wiz. After I die, bring me back to life a thousand years from now."

## #23

### **Checking Out the Scene Fourteen Billion Years in the Future**

It's an arbitrary span of time ahead of us. The Wiz says he only chose it and is offering to transport you there because it's about the same amount of time that lies ahead of us as the amount of time that lies behind us back to the Big Bang.

As you undoubtedly know, the Earth will almost certainly not exist fourteen billion years from now, but the Wiz has assured you that you'll be provided with a comfortable space capsule with transparent walls. You'll be safe and can view the cosmic scene in all directions, and after this little adventure you'll get safely back to your own time.

*Do you tell the Wiz you'd like to see how things look fourteen billion years in the future?*

Roughly five billion years or so after you were living on Earth, the sun expanded into a red giant star, frying and blowing off Earth and other inner planets and a tremendous amount of gas in the process, then collapsing into an extremely dense white dwarf star, which has been cooling and dimming ever since. Now, thanks to the Wiz, you're where Earth would have been in relation to the sun had our planet not been expelled into distant space. This may sound like a disastrous locale, but you're not too hot and not too cold, and perfectly safe in a top-of-the-line space capsule, just as the Wiz promised.

The sun is no farther away than it was when you were back in your own time, but it's shrunken so that it's no more than a harsh pinpoint of white light that hurts your eyes to look at, so you don't. If you were outside your capsule, you'd feel no more heat from it than you would from the full moon on a clear winter night.

The Wiz has accompanied you on this astonishingly long trip through time. "How's this for a fresh perspective?" he asks. Without waiting for an answer, he tells you that he doesn't have means to take you farther ahead in time, but

that if you could go far enough — by about ten to the hundredth power (one followed by one hundred zeros) years from now — you would find that star formation has ceased and galaxies have gone dark.

“Even black holes will have evaporated through a process known as Hawking radiation” he says. “Nothing will be left but subatomic particles. The expansion of space will cool this vast amount of matter/energy to nearly zero kelvin (absolute zero), signaling the heat death of the universe and near total entropy (maximum disorder).

“It’s time to return you to your own time. I’ll leave you with one final thought: If it is true, as some scientists believe, that all matter will disappear, even though it will take an astronomically longer time than fourteen billion years for that to happen, if you could travel that far ahead in time and regain consciousness when you arrive, the time that passed in the meantime would feel shorter than the day.”

## #24

### **You have a Painful Epiphany.**

Is it worth experiencing an extremely painful emotional shock to have an epiphany — to suddenly become enlightened about the true nature of your character and the tragic nature of the life you have led? Suppose you have been acting like an automaton, failing to think about what you're doing and why you've behaved the way you have. It can't be easy to be suddenly awakened and realize what a deadhead you've been.

In Henry James's short story "The Beast in the Jungle," a decent fellow named John Marcher has a feeling that some great event will happen to him, as if a beast in the jungle will spring out at him. He confides this intimation to a close friend, May Bartram, with whom he appears to be on verge of a romantic relationship and presumably marriage. She is receptive, but he seems inhibited from courting her, apparently because of his fixation on the beast he believes will one day spring in front of him. Then he hears that May has died. Soon afterward, he visits her grave. He is standing near it when he sees another man, who — it is clear from his demeanor — is stricken with extreme grief.

The reader can imagine what is going through Marcher's mind at this moment. He is thinking: "*Why didn't I feel grief like that? Why didn't I express love to May? Why did I squander my chance to marry her?*" The beast in the jungle has sprung. Marcher, overcome with anguish, throws himself on May's grave. The great event that he had been waiting for was the realization of his obtuseness and the loss of what could have been his if he had been awake and aware instead of behaving like a zombie.

That's the end of the story, but when I read it, I wondered what happened to Marcher afterwards. He is certainly wiser. He will no longer be emotionally numb. He'll have the capability to lead a richer fuller life than he would have otherwise. But the pain of his realization will always be with him.

\*

\*

*If you were John Marcher, would you be glad that you'd had this epiphany or would you prefer not to have had it?*

If Marcher had been nearing the end of his life, it might have been best if he had been spared such an emotionally searing revelation, but he presumably has many years ahead of him. If that's the case, if I were he, I'd prefer to have the epiphany, painful as it is, because without it, I would only lack pain because I remained numb. My chances for being happy and making others happy would be diminished without the enlightenment that Marcher — despite his anguish — was lucky enough to have.

I can imagine how Gabriel Conroy, another decent man, felt in the aftermath of what in one respect was an eerily similar epiphany in James Joyce's short story, "The Dead." After Gabriel and his wife, Greta, return from a family Christmas party to the hotel room where they are staying, Greta is distant and distracted. In response to Gabriel's questions, she explains that a song that was sung at the party, "The Lass of Aughrim," was the same one that a boy, Michael Furey, sang when she knew him in their youth. She says that she and Michael Furey went on walks together, that he was a gentle boy, that he was in declining health, and that one evening, seemingly because he knew he wouldn't see her again — though it was a cold and rainy — he went to her grandmother's house, where she was staying, and threw gravel against her window to let her know he was there. She went down and told him that he must go home; that he "would get his death in the rain." He replied that he didn't want to live. A few days later, she learned that he had died.

After recounting this incident, Greta, overcome with emotion, threw herself on the bed, sobbing. Gabriel, stunned, realizes that "he had never felt like that himself towards any woman, but he knew that such a feeling must be love."

As was the case with John Marcher, in Henry James's story, Gabriel Conroy had a belated and painful epiphany, one that may have awakened in him the capacity to love.

## #25

### Is Your Life Like a Novel?

Some decades ago, it occurred to me that my life was like a novel and that whether it would be like a relatively short novel or a relatively long novel would depend on how long I lived. I didn't think it was like a great novel, or even a particularly good one, or even a competently constructed one, but at least it had a succession of events, important characters, and some interesting settings and happenings. That notion didn't resurface in my mind until a few years ago, when I came across a book by the philosopher Galen Strawson with the intriguing title *Things That Bother Me* (2018). One of things Strawson talks about is that many people, including famous writers he mentions, think of their lives as being a narrative, and one of the things that bothers him is how many people think that way.

*Do you think of your life as being like a narrative, like a novel?*

Strawson says that thinking of your life as a narrative is not a good way to look at it. He gives reasons I won't get into here and cites an even longer and no less impressive list of writers who, like him, see their lives as non-narrative. The difference bears on how you view your *self*. And that thought, Strawson says, requires introducing a refinement: Are you *endurant* or *transient*? If you're *transient*, you don't think of your *self* as having continuity. If you're *endurant*, you see your *self* as being the same *self* throughout life, though you don't necessarily see your life as a narrative.

The best way to be, it would seem, Strawson being that way himself, is to be non-narrative *transient*, because, as he says, “[I have] no sense of my life as a narrative. . . Nor do I have any great or special interest in my past. . . Nor do I have a great deal of concern for my future.” The reason for this seems to be that, although Strawson knows that he is the same human being throughout his life, what happened a ways back in the past is something that happened to another *self*, and that is what's meaningful rather than that such former *self* is the same human being known as Strawson that



he is now. Similarly, future events in Strawson's life will relate to another self than the self Strawson is now.

After reading this, I thought, maybe I should start looking at my life differently than as a narrative. I'm unhappy with my former self, so disassociating myself from him (it?) has considerable appeal. Maybe, like Strawson, I should cease being interested in my former self. It's what my present self is like that counts. No need to think about my future self either. This would seem to work pretty well. If you see any flaws in your present self, you can disassociate yourself from them simply by deciding to become another self or at least initiating the process of becoming another self. There's a lot to be said for saying, "What I care about, insofar as I care about myself and my life, is how I am now."

Can you honestly stop thinking of your life as a narrative? I guess so, if you think of your personal history as nothing but a sequence of events. Even a mediocre novel (narrative) should have more going for it than that.

Suppose, as in my case, you don't like or admire your former self. If you see your life as a narrative, then that former self is *you* -- you can't get rid of it. The more I thought about it, the more I didn't want anything to do with the non-admirable self I regarded myself as having been. I decided to cut ties with my former selves completely and adopt Strawson's view and look at my life as *non-narrative transient*. You can't change the past, but you can change the present. My only self is the self I am now, and the right philosophy is to concentrate on trying to be the best new self I can be every day.

## #26

### **Would You Want to Live Your Life Over Again After You Die — the Exact Same Life?**

According to the doctrine of eternal recurrence, everything keeps repeating itself. When you die — the theory goes — you'll be born again and live the same life over again. The Wiz just dropped by and told you that this isn't just a theory — it's true; at least it could be true for you, if you like.

Keep in mind that if you are living your life over again, you won't know it. You won't have any memory or sense of having lived before. And there's nothing about the life you're living again that can change because of your experience or because of random events. This being the case, there's no logic in saying, "Once is enough." You'd have no memory of having lived before, so each time you live your life over again would be the same as living it for the first time. If you think your life is worth living, then it's worth living each time it recurs, so you should welcome eternal recurrence. It's a form of immortality!

Before deciding whether to accept the Wiz's offer, you might want to think not only about the quality of the life you've lived so far, but about the life ahead of you. How it looks might affect your decision. Suppose your life has been wonderful, but the future looks bleak. You may not want to risk living your entire life more than once.

*Would You Opt To Live Your Life Over Again After You Die —  
the Exact Same Life?*

Because you have no memory of having lived before, the second time and each successive time your life eternally recurs is indistinguishable from the first. So, I think the question you have to ask yourself is: Has your life been worth living so far, and will the rest of it likely be worth living? Is the pleasure worth the pain, the joy worth the sorrow? If the answer is "yes," then, logically, you'll want to thank the Wiz and say, "I'll go for it."

In my case, after thinking about it, I decided that I would accept the Wiz's offer. I'm a little chagrined that I had to

think about it, because thinking about it raised another question on my mind: If you wouldn't want to repeat your exact same life, does that mean, if you're logically consistent, that you would prefer not to have been born?

## #27

### **Would You Want to Live Your Life Over Again after You Die — Beginning with the Same Circumstances at Birth, but Because of Chance Variations, It Will Play Out Differently.**

This is not eternal recurrence, with everything repeating exactly as it did before. You are born in the same circumstances, with the same parents and with the same DNA, but chance occurrences continually introduce changes in circumstances from those in the life you were living before. Unlike thought experiment #17, in which you turn the clock back to a younger age, you'll have no recollection of the life you're living now. There will be important similarities to the life you lived before — most notably, you'll have the same parents, and after you are born, you'll probably reside in the living quarters they occupied when you were born in your previous life — but differences will accrue because of chance occurrences. It might turn out that you have a baby sister this time instead of a baby brother, or maybe no younger sibling at all. Your second life will diverge increasingly from the first one. Overall, you might have more luck or you might have less luck than you had last time you were living through these years. If you've had exceptionally good luck in life, you might want to consider how having average luck or below average luck might affect you in your second life. On the other hand, if you've had a lot of bad luck in your life so far, you might consider that there's a good chance you'll be luckier the second time around.

Before you decide whether to choose to live a second life, you would be wise to consider the initial conditions of your present life, what the prospects are for the future in your present life, and how they might develop similarly or differently this time.

*Would you opt for living your life over again after you die, with no memory of the life you're living now, and considering that, although your initial circumstances will be the same or almost the same as they were the first time you were born, this time your life might be very different?*

\*

\*

I would accept this offer to live a second life, though with some trepidation. I had some bad luck growing up in my present life, and the conditions that caused that bad luck would for the most part be present during the early years of my second life. Later in my present life, I had some exceptionally good luck that would not likely occur in my second life. Given these circumstances, it's risky to me to opt for a second life. If instead of having bad luck, then good luck, I might have bad luck and then more bad luck. That's a considerable risk, but I enjoy life too much to turn down this chance to live again.

**Imagine that the Species *Homo Erectus*  
Is Still Extant.**

All humans on Earth today are members of the same species, *Homo sapiens*. Throughout human history dominant classes of our species have constructed a variety of pretexts for enslaving others, or at least restricting the rights of others, over whom they have power. In the case of the United States, besides the indigenous people who were living here when the Europeans arrived, the “others” were mostly blacks abducted from Africa and their descendants, and alleged mental inferiority was a principal argument advanced as to why slavery was morally acceptable. Enslavers denied their captives the most minimal educational opportunities, imposing ignorance upon them while arguing that it was justifiable to keep them as slaves because they were ignorant. Claims of alleged inferiority of blacks persisted long after slavery was abolished and are widely held among white Christian nationalists today.

They should read — though it’s unlikely any of them will — Jon Meacham’s biography of Lincoln, which is peppered with references to the astute speeches and writings of Frederick Douglas that serve as a constant reminder to readers that the intellectual capability of this African American far exceeded that of most white politicians and academics of the time, and of our time.

In our present semi-enlightened era, except among those who are outright racists, there is no question that the members of all varieties of our species have requisite intellectual capability to be accorded the full measure of human rights. But what if the members of the genus *homo* captured in Africa and brought to America to spend the rest of their lives as slaves hadn’t been members of our species, but of a distinctly less mentally capable one, such as our precursors, *Homo erectus*, which became extinct a little over 100,000 years ago. As the name implies, these hominims walked upright. Their brains were smaller and less developed than human brains, but they were more intellectually capable than chimpanzees. It’s known that they used fire, made tools

used for making other tools, and that they may have had a “proto-language.” It would seem that they could perform a variety of useful tasks if forced to. It’s reasonable to assume that they could be economically useful as slaves.

*Imagine that the Wiz informed you that hundreds of thousands of members of the species *Homo erectus* had been found living in a remote area on Earth. What policies do you think should govern our relations with them?*

Members of the species *Homo erectus* might be irremediably savage and incapable of mutually agreeable social interaction with humans, or they might be eerily human-like but have some practices and beliefs that are unacceptable in a moderately enlightened society, like those of the Taliban, for example. Apart from targeted policies that would be appropriate to address such characteristics, the right thing to do would be to protect members of the species *Homo erectus* and grant them the full range, or, depending on their capabilities, almost the full range, of human rights. The specifics of a wise policy toward them would be governed by the degree to which we could communicate with them and by our impressions of their temperaments and desires. Their habitat and way of life should be protected against exploitation and malicious interference. It should be illegal to abduct them. Exhibiting them as specimens in zoos or otherwise should be prohibited.

Suppose that among them are those who are intelligent enough to grasp that mentally superior bipeds rule the world, and some of them want to travel beyond the bounds of their existing habitat and interact with these demigods, which is what we might appear to them to be. Should members of our species be permitted to employ them, or adopt them? Might a “charismatic” *Homo erectus* become a television star?

They should, of course, be treated beneficently. Only malevolent and cynical people would view them as work animals or nuisances that should be eliminated. Agreement on that point would stimulate debate on whether similar consideration should extend far more broadly. If it’s agreed that we shouldn’t slaughter, enslave, or exploit members of *Homo erectus*, should we not extend similar protections and care to other sentient creatures?

A quarter of the way through the twenty-first century, more humans seem to be learning that not only deliberate but even incidental cruelty to animals is wrong. The issues to be resolved in formulating policies governing our interactions with members of *Homo erectus* would be a catalyst for serious thinking about how we treat our fellow creatures and how we treat each other.



## #29

### **How Would You React if You Won a Billion Dollars in a Mega Jackpot Lottery?**

Winning a stupendous amount of money can throw one's thinking out of whack. Your dream come true may become a let-down. You may find that you wouldn't want to live in a mansion and you wouldn't feel comfortable driving a hundred-thousand-dollar sports car. Opportunists may swarm about you. A happiness graph of your emotional state is likely to show a big spike up after you learn how much you've won — especially if it allows you to pay off oppressive debts or quit a job you hate, or pursue some long-held dream. But in most cases, the euphoric effect tends to fall away until you are barely happier, if at all, than you were before your extraordinary good luck.

It turns out that tremendous good fortune can be as mentally destabilizing as a tremendous calamity. This would not be true in your case, though, would it? You would keep a level head, right?

*How would you react if you won a billion dollars in a mega jackpot lottery?*

If it were I who had this fantastic good luck, I would allocate most of it to good causes, though that process might take an extended period of time. I would want to engage a competent money manager to maximize the return on capital without taking undue risks. And I'd want to engage a philanthropic consultant. I understand that Mackenzie Scott, the ex-wife of Jeff Bezos, who had several tens of billions of dollars fall into her hands pursuant to her divorce settlement, has conducted an aggressive and enlightened philanthropic regimen. I might try to get in touch with her and some others for advice. I would talk to people likely to have good philanthropic ideas. I have no yearning for luxuries or exotic experiences, like flying to "the edge of space" for the supposed thrill of it, much less owning a half-billion-dollar yacht. What would make me happiest would be using the money to relieve suffering, spread joy and make the world a better place.

Am I kidding myself, imagining that I would be so idealistic? I'd be happy to find out.

## #30

### **Imagine that You've Been Transformed into Dark Matter.**

Dark matter's existence can only be inferred from the gravitational force it exerts. That's how scientists discovered it. They calculated that the gravity of regular matter wasn't strong enough to hold galaxies together and realized that enough of some other kind of matter must be interspersed with regular matter to keep stars from flying apart.

Dark matter is strange stuff. It isn't even dark. If it were, it would block out light coming from behind it, but it doesn't. It would more aptly be called transparent matter, but even that isn't right. Glass and the air around us are transparent, though made of regular matter. What's distinctive about dark matter is that it doesn't interact with regular matter. If a ball of dark matter is on a pool table, a ball of regular matter aimed at it will go through it as if it weren't there. A regular matter pool ball in motion slows slightly because it has to push air aside and because of friction with the surface of the table, but a dark matter pool ball wouldn't slow in the slightest. Now that I think of it, a dark matter pool ball wouldn't roll along on the pool table; it would fall right through it, leaving not the slightest scratch as evidence of its passage through the table top.

Astonishingly, scientists have calculated that there is over five times as much dark matter as there is regular matter (the kind the sun, the moon, the Earth, and we ourselves are made of). One can't help wondering: Do habitable planets form out dark matter? Are there intelligent beings made of this stuff? That would seem unlikely, but the Miracle Wizard just informed you that there are dark matter planets, dark matter people-like creatures live on some of them, and that you could change into being one of them temporarily — long enough to see what they are like!

\*

\*

*Are you more curious than hesitant to spend some time being an intelligent, self-aware reasoning creature made of dark matter?*

*Good news:* Just as the Wiz promised, he transformed you into an advanced “person” made of dark matter, and you find yourself standing on a pleasant meadow on a well-situated dark matter planet. It’s nighttime and you are dazzled by the stars overhead. They are in the same galaxy you were in before — the one known as the Milky Way — but there are five times as many of them shining down on you as there ever are in Earth’s night sky. It never gets completely dark on this dark matter planet except on nights when dark matter stars are blocked by dark matter clouds.

You know that none of this vast number of stars overhead could be the sun. Even if the sun were as close to your dark matter planet as it is to Earth, you couldn’t see it, because you are made of dark matter and can’t detect anything made of regular matter.

Fortunately, the Wiz invested you with fluency in the dark matter creatures’ language, so you’re able to have an extended conversation with one of them. You ask her what scientists on her planet think of regular matter.

“Do you mean dark matter?” she says. “We know it exists; and we know there’s about one-fifth as much of it as there is of regular matter. We just don’t know what the hell it is.”

## #31

### **Would You Be Willing To Reduce Your Future Life Span by Ten Percent to Learn the Answers to Some Major Scientific Questions and How the Future of *Homo Sapiens* Plays Out?**

The Wiz tells you that if you're willing to have the rest of your life last ten percent shorter than it would be otherwise, he'll spend the next few hours that are convenient for you describing the future history of humans and answering important questions scientists have about the universe. Among the things you'll learn is when our species will become extinct or evolve into another species, and how and when this will happen; what effect the development of artificial intelligence will have on humanity; what if anything happened before the "Big Bang" with which our universe came into existence; how our universe will continue to evolve; whether there are other universes besides our own, or have been in the past, or will be in the future; what the nature is of ultimate reality (to the extent it's comprehensible); and if, and to what extent, there is life in outer space, and, if so, whether there are forms of life as intelligent or more so than humans, and where they are, what they are like, and whether they will ever make contact with us.

Are there questions you have that I haven't thought of? The Wiz will answer all of them, as long as you're willing to pay the price of having a ten-percent-shorter lifespan ahead of you.

*Would you take the Wiz up on his offer?*

In my view, one of the worst things about mortality is that you don't get to find out what happens after you die. Maybe most people don't care. "What's it to me? It won't affect me," a friend said to me when I brought up this problem with him.

That's a reasonable attitude, I suppose, but not one I share. I'm curious about what the future holds, and I'd like to learn a lot else about the universe, particularly whether there are advanced alien civilizations out there and where they are and what they are like. I hate knowing that I'll never find out,

so I'm inclined to accept the Wiz's offer, even though I'm 92 and need every bit of future life expectancy I can get.

I realize that if you are young when you have this choice, it's not any easier. For example, suppose you are, say, twenty years old. Assuming that you take good care of yourself, you have a good chance of living seventy years more. Ten percent of that is seven years. That's a lot to blow off just to learn what happens when you could read a dozen speculative fiction books and get several conceivable futures laid out in them, and they might be more interesting than what will really happen.

I've tried to set forth the arguments for and against accepting this offer, but I'm not even going to think about it. For me, getting answers to key scientific questions and knowing what will happen to our species before it becomes extinct is almost like living that long. What a gift, one worth my giving up a few months for, or possibly a whole year.

*Oh, oh.* I was about to go on to describing the next thought experiment when I heard the Wiz whispering in my ear:

"If you take me up on this offer, you're going to wish that you hadn't when your ten-percent-shorter life is about to end."

## #32

### **If You Open a Particular Door in Front of You, the Rest of Your Life May Be Consistently Wonderful.**

The Wiz has often appeared unannounced in front of you. This time, instead of that happening, somehow you have found yourself next to the Wiz, and the two of you are in a long corridor and standing in front of a door. Before you can think of what to say, the Wiz says:

“If you open this door, the rest of your life may be continuously wonderful, and if you decide not to open it, your life will play out just as it would have had you never had this option.”

You realize at once that the trouble with this offer is that the word “may” means that you can’t be sure. You could open the door and find that the rest of your life will be continuously miserable.

Your first thought is that you should *not* open the door. At least, then, your life will play out as well as it would have if you had never been given that option. Still, it’s best not to be hasty. Maybe you can elicit more information from the Wiz, hopefully enough so you can make an informed decision.

“Come on, Wiz,” you say. “What do you mean when you say that the rest of my life *may* be continuously wonderful? How would I know that it wouldn’t be continuously terrible?”

“I understand how you feel,” the Wiz says. “Unfortunately, I’m not authorized to say anything more, except for one thing. I’m not required to say this, but I want you to know that I am happy that I’m allowed to say it. Are you ready?”

“Ready.

Looking you in the eye, the Wiz says, “This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.”

You press the Wiz to say more, but he only shakes his head and says that he’s not allowed to say another word.

*Do you decide to open the door in hope of having a continuously wonderful life ahead of you, or settle for letting the rest of your life play out as it would if the Wiz hadn’t made this offer?*

At this point you still don't know whether you'll have a continuously wonderful life if you open the door, but you do know that the Wiz is no longer being equivocal. He said that he wasn't required to say anything more, but he chose to do so. That means that he wouldn't have said that this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity unless he was trying to tell you that you'll be happy if you open the door.

The only question is whether you can trust him. Is it possible that he wants to trick you into opening the door and having the rest of your life be miserable? You and the Wiz have gotten to know each other pretty well by now. He has been a little tricky at times, and sometimes he seems to enjoy keeping you in suspense, but I don't see the slightest indication that he is malicious. I think you can be confident that he is telling the truth, that he's trying to tell you that the rest of your life really will be continuously wonderful if you open the door. If I were you, I'd feel that it's safe to do so.

I should say, however, that I have a major reservation. It's not about the Wiz. It's about the prospect of a "continuously wonderful life." A lot of what makes life rewarding is meeting challenges and overcoming obstacles. Doesn't that mean that there have to be occasional discontinuities in happiness to have a happy life? Might it be that a continuously wonderful life would be boring?

## #33

### **It Seemed To Have Happened in an Instant. As far As You Can Tell, Everyone in the World Has Disappeared but You.**

What has the Wiz done this time!?! It's been two days now, and you haven't seen a single other person. You haven't been able to reach anyone on the phone, the internet is dead, and there's nothing on TV or the radio. At first, you thought there had been a cyber attack, but the real shocker was when you went outside, and some cars and a truck were stopped on your street and two others had gone off the road and come to rest on the sidewalk, and another had crashed into a tree, all this with not a soul in sight.

You tried to keep calm and got in your car and drove around and soon found cars and trucks crashed everywhere and still not a person dead or alive, as if everyone but you had vanished into thin air.

You drove further afield, but everywhere it was the same, and in some places, cars and trucks had jammed up the road completely, especially if they had stopped for a traffic light and, before it turned green, all the drivers and passengers had disappeared, so that every vehicle just sat where it was or kept moving until it crashed into another one or something else.

You filled your car and some jugs with gasoline so you could drive greater distances and not rely on gas station pumps working, but you soon found that you had to keep backing up because the road ahead was blocked with stalled cars and wrecks, still none with any people in them. You had to fight off panic and go back home and try to think what to do and make sure you hadn't gone insane. Despite the terrible shock, you're sure you'll still be sane, because everything is rational and makes sense except for the complete absence of any other human being.

You don't have a cat or dog — you feel badly thinking of all the ones that may be dying of thirst or starving. It makes you wish that they had disappeared too. Maybe they did. You haven't heard any barking or seen any pets.

You try to calm yourself and think clearly. You're not in immediate danger — there's a practically unlimited quantity



of non-perishable food in supermarkets. As far as you can tell, you can drive as far as you want in any direction. Whenever you're blocked by permanently backed-up traffic, you can walk to the head of the line and find an unblocked vehicle with the key in it and continue your trip. The biggest problem you have is the heaviness that's come over you. You're beginning to think you're insane after all.

*How will you handle this situation? Do you feel any hope for what the future holds? Do you have a strategy?*

It would help if you had a copy of Alan Weisman's book *The World Without Us*. In it, he describes what would happen if all humans suddenly disappeared. Among other effects, toxic gases and liquids would leak from untended factories, oil refineries would leak oil, and nuclear plants would melt down. You'll have to be careful to avoid perils you never had to think about before.

Otherwise, the scenario you're dealing with is a little like luxurious solitary confinement (thought experiment #5). It's far less luxurious, but preferable, in my opinion, because it's open-ended. If you were in luxurious solitary confinement, you would almost certainly never encounter another human again. In the situation you're in now, you've been presented with a frightening mystery, but you should have no trouble providing for your basic needs, at least for a few years, and you'll be exploring, having adventures, probably multiple adventures. You can drive great distances, looking for others — anyone. Who knows what you'll find? You have reason to hope that if you search widely enough, you'll find other people, and that means everything.

## #34

### **What Duty, If Any, Do We Owe to Future Generations?**

The Wiz just appeared in front of you. He has a troubled look on his face.

“Something’s been bothering me,” he says. “You can’t see the future the way, I can. It would be inappropriate for me to disclose precise figures to you, but it’s not giving away too much to say that there will be billions of people born after you die. Their well-being will be determined in part by how people living now preserve Earth’s resources and ensure its continuing habitability.

“Because of humans’ profligacy with fossil fuels and despoilation of the ecosystem, suffering and morbidity will rise dramatically over the centuries to come. Global warming will be relatively tolerable for most people alive today, but consider what its effects will be during the next century or two.

“Imagine that a delegation of people born one hundred years from now returned to the present and asked why we’re turning the planet into a hot and noxious wasteland. It would be as wrong to ignore future people’s needs as much as it would be wrong to refuse to help a neighbor in distress.”

*Should you be concerned about the welfare of future generations? For example, should more of your charitable donations and personal energies be directed toward efforts to arrest global warming and maintain sustainable long-term ecosystems and resources?*

I suspect that many people feel that they have enough to worry about without taking the welfare of future generations into account. Still, what the Wiz said gives one cause to think about what it will be like on Earth hundreds of years from now.

My feeling is that it’s natural and right to direct our time, energy, and charitable giving to benefit people who are living now, but the welfare of future people should be considered too. In particular, I think that we should support and

participate in efforts to ensure sustainable long-term ecosystems and resources; to prevent civilization-threatening catastrophes, such as nuclear war, bio-terrorism, and out-of-control artificial general intelligence; and to defend and preserve democratic and humanitarian institutions and processes. That will help future people and us too.

## #35

### **If You Could Have Three Famous Writers, Dead or Alive, Join You for Dinner, Whom Would You Invite?**

*The New York Times Sunday Book Review* regularly features a one-page transcript of an interview with a noted writer. The questions are usually the same or similar. Often the first question asked is, "What books are on your nightstand?" Judging by how many straight answers the interviewer gets, most authors have sturdy nightstands stacked with books. Also regularly asked is, "What books have influenced you the most?" "What famous books have you never gotten around to reading?" "Is there a famous book you feel is overrated?" More often than not, the last question the interviewer poses is a thought experiment: "If you could have three famous writers, dead or alive, join you for dinner, whom would you invite?" This usually elicits an answer accompanied by a one-line explanation of why that choice is made. I'm sure I'll never be interviewed for this column, but that hasn't stopped me from thinking about what writers I would invite for dinner if I had the chance.

*What three famous writers, dead or alive, would you have join you for dinner if you had the chance, and why would you make these particular choices?*

Some of the interviewees name the famous writers they would most like to dine with, but don't give reasons for selecting them; some select ones who they think would provide the most sparkling conversation; some select ones with the hope of clearing up mysteries about them.

The first writer I thought of asking was Shakespeare. The characters he created exemplify virtually the whole repertoire of human behavior. Dozens of them might be more interesting to have as dinner companions than most famous writers, and listening to Shakespeare talking about them would be the closest I could get to meeting them.

After further reflection, I decided that this fantasy would not likely be realized even if Shakespeare showed up. One

can never detect that he was expressing his personal opinion through one of his characters. I'm doubtful that he would open up about them at my little dinner party. For that reason, if I had the chance to talk to him, I'd ask him if he had kept up on the course of history during the four centuries since he died, and if he had, I'd ask what his opinion is of some major figures during that span and whether comparisons might be drawn between some of them and certain characters in his plays.

I hope my invitation would also be accepted by Joseph Campbell, a prominent 20th century expert on comparative mythology, two of whose lectures I attended. Campbell emphasized how the same basic themes could be found in the mythological traditions of disparate cultures throughout the world. This was the idea for his most well-known book — *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Surprisingly — and probably the basis of much criticism directed at him — he was irked by the mythology enshrined in the Bible. In what may have been the last recorded interview of Campbell before he died, in 1987, he replied to a question about the Bible by the interviewer, Fraser Boa, "Ach, the Bible. It's a compendium of all the mistakes ever made in translating the symbolic into historical." Boa failed to follow up on this radical assertion. Perhaps he thought the subject was too large or too delicate to pursue. I would question Campbell at length on this if he'd be willing to attend my dinner party.

As for my third guest, I would ask that most perspicacious observer of the human animal, Marcel Proust, had he not covered so much in his six-volume-long (in my edition) novel, *In Search of Lost Time*, that I doubt if he would have much to add to it. I thought that a good alternative to Proust might be James Joyce, but then I realized that I might be bedazzled and befuddled by a stream of cryptic references and lexicographical oddities that he would conjure up to amuse himself.

Maybe I would think of someone else. Otherwise, I'd probably settle for the company of the Dalai Lama. I'd like to ask him what's required to obtain *bodhichitta*, which he defines as having "a good heart imbued with wisdom."

## #36

### **You Have Been Sentenced To Live for a Year on a Remote Small Uninhabited Island and Can Bring Only One Book with You. What Book Would You Bring?**

This is another thought experiment that's a little like luxurious solitary confinement ((thought experiment #5) in that you are doomed to live in isolation, except, in this instance, thankfully confined for only a year. Your basic needs will be taken care of, and there's no particular health risk, and presumably the island won't be totally uninteresting, but instead of having an array of amenities, including whole libraries of books, movies, and games that some billionaires might envy, you'll have only one modest luxury, a printed book of your choice.

*What printed book would you select to bring with you?*

Shakespeare's collected works in one volume immediately came to my mind. Where else could you find such a rich assemblage of masterpieces between two covers? As was inevitable, the only one-volume edition of Shakespeare's complete works I've seen has small print, a tightly packed format, and is hard to hold. Still, it's the content that counts. Right?

Another possibility would be Harold Bloom's 800-page anthology, *Best Poems in the English Language*. In it, he comments on many of the poems and supplies extensive biographical notes as to each poet represented. Many of the poems Bloom chose are replete with cryptic passages and references that are obscure to most readers. With only one book to read on a remote island, this could be an advantage. You might want the book you bring to be one that you can puzzle over, day after day. You'd have plenty of time to speculate about what the poet is saying. It could be frustrating, though, if it turns out that you have all the time in the world but are perpetually in the dark about what a poem means.

An alternative to a tome stuffed with elegant literary passages and arcane references, allusions, ellipses, and antinomies would be a simple tale that's so endearing that

it's a comfort to have around — that will always be there, like a big shaggy dog that will come over for a pat when you summon it. Such a book is Kingsley Amis's classic novel *Lucky Jim*, a work that I've reread several times as an aid to preserving mental equilibrium.

Jim Dixon, the anti-hero of Amis's mid-twentieth century novel, is a lazy, irresponsible, marginally competent young history instructor at a second- or third-rate British university. He's not above playing pranks and concocting outrageous fabrications, and he is rightly fearful that he will be sacked at the end of the term. He smokes too many cigarettes (even by 1950s standards), he drinks too much alcohol, and he shirks every type of responsibility as much as he can get away with; in fact, more than he can get away with. He is lucky indeed to end up with a pretty girl and a desirable job. Except it's not just luck that gets him through — he has a basic integrity, an entrenched refusal to be phony and pretentious, marks of nearly everyone else around him. He deserves the pretty girl. As for the job he's offered after being justly dismissed from his position at the university, admittedly, as his new employer tells him, he has no qualifications for it, but more important, he has no disqualifications.

Even the quietest life you could construct can be full of surprises and challenges. That's why I could imagine living in a world as narrowly circumscribed as that of Bertie Wooster in one of P. G. Wodehouse's accounts of him, such as *Right Ho, Jeeves!* (Jeeves is Bertie's astonishingly astute butler.) Reading one of these books will draw you into a dreamy state in which illness, aging, crime, poverty, war, natural or human-made disasters except for a chipped tea saucer or the occasional impositions of a fussy aunt or other such feather-weight adversities are rarely so much as mentioned, everyone is well-fed, well-clothed, and well-cared for, free of illnesses and other infirmities, and in which our narrator, Bertie Wooster himself, when he'd rather be sitting in a comfortable chair at his club gazing out the window while quaffing an agreeable beverage, is subjected to only the most inconsequential difficulties one could imagine.

How can reading such stuff not be boring? Chalk it up to the genius of Mr. Wodehouse, a rummy author if there ever was one, as attested to by Evelyn Waugh on the back cover of one my copies: "Mr. Wodehouse's idyllic world can never stale. He will continue to release future generations from captivity that may be more irksome than our own."

I don't think I'd go crazy during a year-long confinement if *Right Ho, Jeeves* or *Lucky Jim* was the only book I could bring, but at the last moment, having no more time to think about it, I'd probably play it safe and bring the Bard.



## #37

### **You Have the Chance To Have the Most Over-the-Top Single Experience of Your Life that You Specify.**

I'm thinking of a brief period, perhaps lasting only a few minutes, a true peak: For example, experiencing what it's like to be engaged in a prolonged rally at championship point against the #1 seed at Wimbledon, and your opponent drills a sharp-angled crosscourt shot, a sure winner had you not anticipated it and raced to get your racket on it and sent the ball clearing the net by a millimeter and catching the line while the crowd goes wild, and a few minutes later you're holding the trophy above you, turning, smiling at everyone and basking in the moment. Or maybe it's the Masters golf tournament, and to win it you need to sink a 22-foot putt on an uneven sloping green, and the crowd is holding its breath as you give the ball a firm tap, and for a second it looks like it will roll past the cup, but it veers slightly at the last half-second and drops in. You nod appreciatively at the onlookers, doffing your hat, acknowledging their applause. Or maybe it's not sports that's delivering this over-the-top moment. Maybe you're lifting your baton to bring forth the opening notes of the Overture to Mozart's *Don Giovanni* at the Metropolitan Opera House, in New York. Or, maybe it's nothing seemingly dramatic, and you're not a celebrity, and you have no special skills, but you happen to be walking in a swampy region of Louisiana and turn your head and gasp, because perched on a branch thirty feet away is an ivory billed woodpecker, an exotic and beautiful bird that had been thought to be extinct, and you get almost a dozen good pictures of it, including one in which it is taking flight.

*What over-the-top experience would you ask the Miracle Wizard to arrange for you?*

It's hard for me to imagine the thrill of winning a major tennis or golf championship title because I never had the experience or skill to give it context. Same for conducting a great orchestra playing a work of genius. I'd probably be

wise to ask for something not too distant from what I think of as over-the-top experiences I've had in life.

Probably the best among these happened to me about thirty years ago: Swimming about a hundred yards off the beach in Kealahou Bay in the Big Island of Hawaii, I became almost completely surrounded by spinner dolphins. I felt no fear — I had never heard of an attack on humans by dolphins — but I sensed that I had invaded their territory. I began leisurely backstroking toward the beach. Though none of the dolphins approached within perhaps twenty yards, they continued to monitor me. I knew that what was going through their minds was the same as was going through mine: curiosity. More than anything else, I think it was that feeling of kinship — that our similarity seemed greater than our differences — that made this a peak experience for me.

So what have I never experienced but might rival that as a peak moment? I'm sure I could think of dozens if I took the time for it. For starters, how about skiing at breakneck speed down *Le Face de Bellevarde*; Val d'Isere, France.

That would be good for starters, though it would probably be for finishers too, with my completing the run on a toboggan guided by *la patrouille de ski*.

As an alternative, especially in view of my advanced age, I would probably be wise to settle for rereading descriptions of the most outstanding peak experiences I'm aware of, all conveniently compiled in the classic *New Yorker* story by James Thurber, "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty."

**You Can Choose To Have a Feeling of Complete Assurance that You'll Go to Heaven When You Die.**

"Here's a chance to banish anxiety completely for the rest of your life," the Wiz tells you. "If you accept my offer, you'll feel a warm glow of contentment no matter what happens to you."

"Sounds good," you say. "What's the hitch?"

"There's no hitch — just a terrific pay-off."

You notice what you've come to regard as a sly grin on his face, as he continues: "All you have to do say 'Yes,' and from that moment on, you'll have an unshakeable belief that you are predestined to go to heaven when you die, and that the heaven you'll get to will be more wonderful than you can imagine."

Before you have time to absorb this, he adds, "Did you hear what I said? You'll never have a flicker of doubt. Nothing could make you happier than what I'm offering you."

"It does sound attractive," you say. "But you haven't assured me that I'll get into this super great heaven."

"That's because you won't. You'll still be like everyone else after you die — you'll have no more consciousness than a rock. But you'll have total contentment and total confidence for the rest of your life — the happiness that can only come from being one hundred percent sure that your afterlife will be everything you could imagine and a lot more. In my opinion, you should think twice before passing up an opportunity like this."

*Do you say "yes" to the Wiz's offer?*

I can see the appeal of having absolute certainty that you'll have a blissful afterlife, but I wouldn't jump to accept this offer. It's too much like an invitation to be brainwashed by a cult leader. I'm troubled with the negative effect it might have on my behavior. If my afterlife is going to be so much superior to my present life, and it will last forever instead for the paltry number of years remaining to me, my present life will seem inconsequential compared to my future life. I'm

less likely to live it to the full. I'll be living a lie even though I won't know it. Thinking about such an existence gives me the creeps. "No thanks, Wiz," I'd say. "I'm not going compromise my life for an illusion."

## #39

### **You Promised Your Uncle To Perform a Ten-Minute Religious Ritual Every Day for the Rest of Your Life.**

Imagine that if your Uncle Harry had not paid for your education, you wouldn't have been able to graduate from college and embark on a promising career. Harry was a widower and had no children, and the two of you were quite close despite one big difference — he was a very pious man, and you are not.

When you heard that he been suddenly taken ill and had only a few days to live, you made sure to visit him. You wanted to say goodbye and let him know how much his kindness and generosity meant to you and what a difference it made in your life.

When you saw him, you were shocked by how ill he looked, but relieved that he was still clear-headed and quite talkative.

Among other acts of devotion, Harry unfailingly spent ten minutes each day performing a ritual he felt was of sacred importance. You've kept the written instructions he gave you for it. To please him, you even learned the chants and prayers it involved, but you never practiced it yourself.

A couple of days after you visited him, you got a call informing you that he might not live through the night. You immediately went again to see him. In what seemed like his last breaths, he asked you to promise that you would carry out the same, daily, ten-minute ritual that he always had, and that you would try to never miss a day for the rest of your life.

You felt that this was no time to equivocate, so you said, "I promise I will, Harry."

"That means so much to me," he murmured. "Now I can die in peace."

To your amazement, there was a smile on his face, half an hour later, as he passed away.

It has been a month since Harry died, and every day since then you've carried out the ritual. You've spent about five hours on it so far. That will translate into about sixty hours a year. You often have to fit this ten-minutes in when it's inconvenient, like when you're tired and want to go to bed. It

has no religious significance to you. You get no spiritual uplift from it. It won't do anything for Harry. It makes no sense to keep it up.

Still, you did promise him, and he probably wouldn't have died with a smile on his face if he hadn't thought that it was a promise you would keep.

*Do you resolve to keep your promise to Harry, or do you decide to quit?*

I'm sure there would be a divergence of views as to how to deal with this problem. Personally, I would quit. It does Harry no good to keep this up. If he hadn't been dying, he probably wouldn't have made such a demanding request. He knew I didn't share his religious feelings. I don't regret having promised to grant his request. It think it was my unhesitating promise that made him smile.

I appreciate how some people might feel differently. Even though they didn't share Harry's religious conviction, they might gain or maintain spiritual strength from keeping their word. They wouldn't be doing this for Harry — they would be doing it for themselves, so it would make sense for them. It wouldn't for me.

## #40

### **Can You Prove That You Are a Human Conversing with René, a Super Advanced Chatbot, even though René Claims that It Is a Human and that You Are a Chatbot?**

René is the most advanced A.I. computer chatbot yet. A panel comprising computer scientists, neuroscientists, and psychologists will read the transcript of an hour-long conversation you're about to have with him, or "it," as you prefer to call René, just as René prefers to call you "it."

*Can you think of a stratagem to employ in your conversation with René that would demonstrate beyond doubt that you are the human and René is not?*

It occurred to me that the best way to trick this crafty machine into exhibiting that it's not human is to make it betray that it has no sense of humor or no more than a fake sense of humor. To try out this theory, I would say this to René: "Recently, a friend of mine said to me, 'It would be nice to go to heaven when I die, but, given that chance, I would choose to go back to my apartment.'\* That surprised me. So, here is my question, René: Does my friend have a fundamental misunderstanding about what afterlife options are available to those who are admitted to heaven?"

If, despite its lack of olfactory apparatus, René smells a rat, I would try to find a professional who would help me. It may take comedy writers to save the world from A.I.

Do you have a better idea? I hope so.

---

\* similar to a statement attributed to Woody Allen

**How Do You Feel When, on the Brink of Death, You Learn that You Just Won a Nobel Prize?**

If you're like me in this respect, there's not the remotest possibility of winning a Nobel prize, but the purpose of this experiment is to imagine how you would feel if, just as your life is about to end, you received such momentous recognition of something you had achieved. Call it the ultimate bittersweet moment.

It may be harder for you to imagine winning a Nobel Prize than it is to imagine creating a new universe, but it *is* possible: You're dying, but still clear-headed, and a nurse hands you your smart phone. A fully authenticated and indisputably verified caller notifies you that, for your special extraordinary achievement, you will receive this most esteemed award.

*How would you feel?*

You might feel a little thrill, maybe more — it depends on how important winning a Nobel is to you emotionally. And you might feel a wave of melancholy as you reflect on how you won't be able to enjoy this great honor. No trip to Stockholm for you. You won't have time or energy to read all the congratulatory messages and calls that will soon be pouring in. There will be a very large deposit in your estate's bank account, but that's not the same as one in yours. And you won't have years ahead enjoying that aura of exceptional attainment that attends Nobel laureates wherever they go. Nonetheless, you know that the award of a Nobel prize is recognition that you made an "outstanding contribution for the benefit of humankind." That would be something to hold on to in your last hours— that in a not insignificant way, you made the world a better place.



## #42

### **Which, if Any, of These Three Types of Persons Would You Prefer To Be in Your Next Life?**

Once again, the Wiz has appeared, smiling, as always, when he's about to offer you a special deal.

"I have a special deal," he says.

"What is it, and what's the hitch?" you ask.

"You're going to like this," he says, "and there's no hitch. I'm going to turn the clock back, but not until you live out your life just as if I had never come along. Then, the moment you die, I'll turn it back to the year, day, and time it is now, but instead of being the person you are now and will be for the rest of your present life, you'll be the same gender you are now — be assured of that — but otherwise you'll be a completely different person, and you'll have just had your thirtieth birthday.

"You'll have no memory of having lived a previous life, but you'll remember your new life and the experiences you've had in it the way any thirty-year-old would."

"That might be good, and it might not," you say. "What sort of person would I be in this new life?"

"Good question," the Wiz says. "It wasn't easy for me to arrange for this, but you'll get to choose to be one of three different people, each of whom is well above average in most ways, is an attractive person, and is in good shape physically. Unfortunately, I'm empowered to give you only a few brief bits of information about each of them."

"I'll be interested in whatever you can tell me," you say.

"I thought you would be," the Wiz says. "But first I want to warn you that there will not be a trace of your present personality, values, skills, interests, or other characteristics in the new person you will be. You will be this new person and no one else. I'm sorry, but this is all I can give you to go on in making your choice except for these capsule summaries as to each of them:

"Person A has an interesting and well-paying job and bright future in a cutting-edge tech firm, is an accomplished jazz pianist, and has a close relationship

with A's bright and delightful five-year-old daughter. Person A is also in a difficult and unhappy marriage that's been going downhill and probably hasn't long to last.

"Person B is a gregarious, well-liked, self-assured business and community leader, whose spouse is a lawyer and representative in the state legislature. The two of you have been called a future power couple. You're planning to wait a few years longer before having your first child.

"Person C, who is single, is a visual artist whose work has been rapidly gaining recognition and commanding higher prices in gallery sales. Person C is presently unmarried, but has many friends and is "on the lookout for the right one to come along."

*You must choose to be one of these three people. Which one will it be?*

Given the sketchy information you've been given, there's a lot of guess work to be done here. The Wiz was wise to point out that whichever person you choose to be, you will be that person and have that person's preferences and outlook on life and not your present one. Nonetheless, since you are still in your present life, it would be natural for you to choose to be the person who seems most in synch with your own values and preferences.

Here's my take on them:

Person B's position in the community and prospects look excellent. B may be happy — possibly happier than either A or C — but I have a feeling that there's something missing in B's life. B and B's spouse strike me as ambitious, but conventional, and — this is just a guess — lacking in *esprit*. B may accomplish a lot and have a truly satisfying life. If I were B, I probably would prefer to be myself rather than A or C, but at the moment I'm still me, and I'm not drawn to being B.

One of the few things the Wiz was able to tell you about Person C, the artist, was that C has "many friends" and is "on the lookout for the right one to come along." There's nothing wrong with that, and this is more guesswork on my part, but I sense that there may be a certain shallowness in C. I have to admit that I'm relying on gut instinct in rejecting

the possibility of living C's life and becoming a famous artist, but I'm not keen on being C.

Person A has an unhappy marriage and appears to be headed for a divorce, but A's career looks interesting and promising. I suspect that A's next romantic relationship will be a big improvement. It bodes well that A and A's daughter have a close relationship, and that this daughter is bright and delightful. She'll probably be a great joy to A throughout A's life. That A is an accomplished jazz pianist and presumably knocks out great stuff at the keyboard clinches it for me. I'd tell the Wiz, "I'll choose to be Person A."

## #43

### **Imagine that You Had Never Been Born.**

The Wiz appears, as usual without warning. He drapes his arm around you as if to console you for what's about to happen.

"Sorry," he says, "but in exactly three minutes, history will be revised in a way such that you will never have been born. It won't be as if you had died. When people die, they leave traces of themselves behind — children, relationships, good things that they have accomplished, or in all too many cases injury they've done. But you'll leave nothing, because you'll never have been anything but nothing.

*How do you feel when you learn that in three minutes, history will change in such a way that you will never have been born?*

I think that when I die, family members and friends will feel sad, and I don't like to think of an event happening that makes anyone unhappy. That wouldn't be a problem if I'd never been born. On the other hand — and far more important — if I had never been born, my children and grandchildren would never have been born. They would have been deprived of their lives. And they would have been deprived of the good they have done and will do, for that is their character.

As for people for whom such considerations aren't applicable, once they are dead, it would seem to make little difference whether they had been born or not, except that it would make a difference if during their lives they had brought more happiness than unhappiness to the world. It would matter whether they had made the world a better place or a worse one. If the former, it would be a tragedy if they had never been born. If the latter, it would be just as well.

**What If Logical Reasoning from a Sound Premise  
Leads to a Repugnant Conclusion?**

Here's the Wiz again, but scowling instead of smiling.

"Remember the universe I let you set up?" he asks.

"You've been neglecting it."

"I thought it would run by itself," you say.

"It will, but not optimally. There's a big decision you should make. I have a list of about three thousand of your planets on which species of intelligent self-aware beings are evolving. You can arrange the DNA of them so that, given the environment they're in, you can cause to come into existence about four hundred billion individuals who average very high on the happiness scale and feel that their lives are very much worth living — call it version A."

"That sounds pretty good," you say. "Can I change things so they average even higher on the happiness scale?"

"I'm afraid not," the Wiz says. "Physical conditions are generally quite harsh on most of these planets, and you can't change that. But if you'd like, you can arrange everyone's DNA so that you can cause to come into existence four hundred trillion intelligent beings who would be barely happy and feel that their lives are barely worth living — call it version B. That's a *thousand times* more intelligent beings with net happiness — though by the narrowest of margins — than in version A."

"Barely worth living? Somehow, version B doesn't appeal to me," you say.

"You'd better think this through," the Wiz says. "Each individual's happiness would be much less in version B than in version A, but there would a thousand times as many individuals in version B as in version A, so the total amount of happiness would be greater in version B than in version A. Do you want to keep four hundred trillion intelligent creatures from coming into being whose lives would be worth living even if only by the slightest margin? Don't you have an ethical duty to run your universe so it has the largest amount of happiness possible?"

"I don't see that I do," you say. You're afraid the Wiz may get angry on hearing this, or at least give you a stern lecture.

Instead, he grins and says, “This situation reminds me of the British philosopher Derrick Parfit. I don’t remember the details, but I know he did some kind of calculation from which it appeared that if your goal is to have the most happiness in the world, it’s logical to have a great number of people who are barely happy than a much smaller number of people who are very happy. He said that he had reached a “repugnant conclusion.”

*In making your decision, would you prefer your universe to be one in which there are four hundred billion intelligent beings who on average are very happy and feel that their lives are very well worth living, or one in which there are a thousand times as many — four hundred trillion — intelligent beings who on average are barely happy and feel that their lives are worth living by the narrowest of margins?*

It may logically follow that the total amount of happiness in a universe with a very large number of people who are barely happy is greater than in a universe with a much smaller number of people who are very happy, but I agree with Professor Parfit that this is a “repugnant conclusion.” My non-repugnant conclusion from this is that our instinctive emotions and esthetic judgments sometimes provide a truer answer to a problem than one reached by logical analysis.

#45

**Would It Be the Right Thing To Do To Subject One Person  
To a Half Hour of Agony to Save Ten Million T.V. Viewers  
from Missing the Thrilling Final of the World Cup  
SoccerMatch?**

The Wiz just dropped by to see you, but he doesn't have any pronouncements to make or deals to offer. He says he's curious as to how you would answer the question posed above. "I didn't think it up; some philosopher did," he tells you. "I can't answer it. Maybe you could."

*Do you answer the question the Wiz put to you (and if so, how?), or do you say, "I've had enough of arguments that lead to repugnant conclusions, and same goes for repugnant questions."?*

I'm with you if you chose the second option, but this particular repugnant question caused me to think of a question about a *repugnant situation*: Would it be worth it to impose modest additional taxes on one thousand billionaires to finance tax credits that will lift and keep ten million children out of poverty?

## #46

### The Limits of Civic Duty: A Case Study

Here's the Wiz again.

"I'm about to wave my wand," he says.

*Whoosh.*

Suddenly you realize that you have just begun a three-day hike on a beautiful trail through a mountain wilderness. The area is new to you, and you feel excited at the prospect of immersing yourself in the natural world.

The trail winds its way through a forest of immensely tall spruce trees. The air is crisp and clear. Through the gaps in the forest, you see snow peaks in the distance.

About ten minutes into your hike, you notice a discarded sandwich wrapper. You pick it up and stuff it in your backpack. A few minutes later, you come upon an empty plastic water bottle. You stomp it flat, pick it up, and jam it into your backpack, feeling a mixture of pleasure that you're a good citizen and annoyance that some people litter. Don't they know the rule of hiking: "Pack it in. Pack it out."?

*How many times do you think you'd stop to pick up litter on the trail before you say, "The hell with it?"*

Everyone has a civic duty to refrain from littering, especially when walking on a nature trail. You can get so you instinctively avoid littering, and fulfilling this duty is effortless.

I've heard it said, "Litter breeds litter." If litter becomes so abundant that even people who revere nature stop picking up trash, it takes a major cleanup campaign to return a trail to litter-free conditions. To achieve that, those who want to be responsible citizens have a more demanding duty — to support a campaign to change people's habits so that keeping the area litter-free becomes ingrained in the culture, and fulfilling one's civic duty is effortless once again.



## #47

### **Suppose Everyone Held the View that Free Will, as Most People Think of It, Is an Illusion.**

Many philosophers and scientists are of the opinion that we are exercising our free will when we make decisions. As the English poet, William Ernest Henley put it, “I am the captain of my soul.” Many other philosophers and scientists are of the opinion that we aren’t exercising free will when we make decisions, that whatever we decide to do was caused by events — including events inside our brains of which we’re not aware — that happened before we decided to do it. Many other philosophers and scientists are of the opinion that we are exercising free will *even if* whatever we decide to do was caused by events that happened before we decided to do it. Those who hold this opinion are called compatibilists. *Huh*, I silently exclaimed when I first learned this. The writer I. B. Singer exhibited no such befuddlement. He said, “Of course I have free will — I have no choice.”

In his book *Determined* (2023), Stanford University neuroscientist Robert Sapolsky makes an exhaustive, or exhausting, (take your pick) argument that our decisions are determined by our brain states immediately before we made them, and these in turn are made by the factors that caused these brain states to be in these particular configurations, and these in turn were caused by by a great variety of factors, including our genetic, cultural, and environmental experience, and these all have their own respective causal antecedents, and, for this reason, what we think of as our free will is an illusion. Sapolsky is convinced that free will and determinism are not compatible. He leaves no room for free will.

I think the dominant view is that, though we may be affected by our emotional states and our thinking can be skewed by hormones and psychological factors, we are capable of exercising free will in making decisions. For example, the philosopher Mark Balaguer believes that although many of our decisions involve no deliberation, we do exercise free will in cases where we make “torn decisions,” ones we are forced by circumstances to think about.

I’m far from being an expert on this contentious topic, and there is a wide variety of views among those who are. The purpose of this thought experiment isn’t to ascertain which view is the right one; it’s to consider what the effect would be

if everyone believed that Sapolsky and his fellow determinists are right: that independent free will is an illusion; that, in fact, our decisions are caused by our brain states, which in turn are caused by a complex interaction of our genes, experience, environment, and random processes and events, all subject to the laws of physics.

*If everyone (including you!) believed that independent free will is an illusion, would that affect your thinking or behavior? Would it have any effect on our society? Would it be conducive to people thinking differently about their own behavior and that of others?*

My impression is that most people — experts and non-experts alike — think that it would be depressing if most people thought that they had no free will, that we are puppets of fate, acting out a predetermined script. I think this is a baseless fear. For one thing, all of us, including determinists, are obliged to behave as if we are acting on our own free will. You can't wake up in the morning and think, I'll just stay in bed until it's determined that I'll get up, and then lie there and wait: At some point you decide to get up and get moving. In any case, there have been a great many brilliant thinkers who believe that our actions are predetermined yet have been highly productive and exhibited as much nobility in their lives as anyone who professes a belief in free will.

The prominent physicist Carlo Rovelli addresses this topic in his book, *White Holes*. (2023). Rovelli aligns himself with the hard deterministic view of the 17th century philosopher Baruch Spinoza, but he imparts a poetic gloss on it with a parable about an old fisherman who had been enchanted with sunsets until he learns that the sun doesn't sink into the sea. The revelation that what he had thought was real is an illusion has a devastating effect on him. Rovelli calls this "the fisherman's mistake." The sunset is as beautiful as ever, though viewed in a different perspective.

Rovelli likens discovering that the freedom we experience in making decisions is subject to the operation of the laws of physics — "that it is not borne out at the microscopic level" — to discovering that the sunset is not the sun sinking into the sea. "It changes nothing in our lives."

It changes nothing, except that if it became generally recognized that determinism is true — that free will is an illusion — it could affect how we think about life and how we

view the world. There are those who believe that general acceptance that free will is an illusion would precipitate moral disintegration. I hold what I suspect is a minority view: that it would tend to increase compassion, foster equanimity, temper egoism, and help cultivate a sense of acceptance of the human condition; that people would, on average, behave better. Admittedly, such an idealized reaction might only occur in a world in which Rovelli's sensibilities, rather than those of the fisherman, prevail.

## #48

### Can You Get Rid of Your Sense of Self?

As I understand it, according to traditional Buddhist doctrine and in the opinion of some philosophers and scientists, the self is an illusion. The extent to which that's true presumably depends on what one means by "self." If not having a self means not experiencing pleasure and pain, you may be able to minimize it, but you can't get rid of it. And you can't get rid of your psychological continuity, your store of active memories, including ones that assert themselves from time to time whether summoned or not. What I imagine you might be able to get rid of is emotional concern about your status in the world. But would you want to? What would the upsides and downsides be of freeing yourself from concern about your self?

Trying to get a grip on this conundrum, I listened to a podcast of a conversation the neuroscientist and philosopher Sam Harris had with Jay Garfield, a professor of philosophy at Smith College and the author of *Losing Ourselves: Learning to Live without a Self* (2022).

Garfield doesn't deny that you are a *person*, but he's convinced that the *self* is an illusion. He says that the reason the *self* isn't real is that there isn't an executive in your brain managing your affairs. Rather, thoughts and decisions are produced by brain processes that are causally brought about. Your brain constructs impressions of the world based on inputs from your sensory faculties and in response to experience. One of the things it constructs is a sense of *self*.

Since a sense of self became naturally selected in the course of human evolution, one might think that it would be useful to maintain it. Nonetheless, Garfield argues that the illusion of self stokes pride, anger, and other undesirable emotions, and that we would be less self-absorbed and more mindful without it.

*If the Wiz offered you a chance to be get rid of your sense of self, would you take him up on it?*

\*

\*

Wouldn't one feel diminished without a sense of self?  
Wouldn't lacking a sense of self erode motivation, self-confidence, and one's sense of self-worth? These questions weren't addressed specifically in the interview, but I think that Garfield's answer to them, which I would agree with, is clear: You can feel more genuinely self-confident and strongly motivated once you have rid yourself of the illusion of self.

**Can a Person Change Sufficiently  
to Become Another Person?**

Imagine that you are a judge, and you must decide whether to release a man from prison. The individual involved, John Dozemeyer, was convicted of beating a man to death with a crowbar five years ago. At the time, Dozemeyer had a reputation of being an erratic, impulsive, and sometimes violent individual. A neighbor said of him, “He made me nervous the way he’d look at me.”

Dozemeyer was sentenced to life imprisonment with no possibility of parole, but his lawyer claims that he should be released from prison because he is not the same person as the person who committed the crime.

Examining the record, you see that two months after Dozemeyer started his term of imprisonment, he had a brain tumor removed, and that after recovering from the operation, he manifested a radically altered personality. Instead of being threatening and unnerving, he became completely rational and accommodating — a model prisoner in every way. He became known for teaching fellow prisoners computer skills, enabling many of them to get jobs after they were released.

Dozemeyer’s lawyer’s claim that he was now a different person was backed up by prison officials and two psychiatrists who examined the record and interviewed him at length. Even the prosecutor and members of the victim’s family have urged that Dozemeyer be released, given the unusual circumstances of the case.

As a judge, you feel bound by the law, which mandates a sentence of life imprisonment without parole. You would like to be able to release Dozemeyer from incarceration, but see no legal basis for doing so unless you are willing to accept the novel argument that the law doesn’t apply in this situation because Dozemeyer is a different person than the murderer. It would not be enough that he is a different person metaphorically — in that his behavior has changed so much that he acts like a different person — but a different person in the respects that are most meaningful in defining what a person is: his or her basic character, personality, set of values, and attitude toward other human beings.

*Would you allow Dozemeyer to be released from prison?  
Under the law, to do so, you would have to find not just that  
he has changed for the better or shown remorse, but that,  
although he has the same name and life history, he is not the  
same person as the John Dozemeyer who was convicted of  
murder five years earlier?*

Dozemeyer is the same person in many respects; for example, he has the same life history he always had, but his lawyer makes a powerful argument that he is a different person than the murderer in the most important ways in which personhood is established. Unless there is a binding precedent that governs the facts of this unusual case, I think the judge has a legal basis for releasing Dozemeyer from prison on the ground that he is not the same person as the murderer.

#50

**Would You Like To Be Able To Dream After You Die?**

Hamlet, contemplating death, mused:

To sleep, perchance to dream—ay, there's the rub:  
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,  
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil  
Must give us pause. . .

They might be disturbing, those dreams, disturbing the sleep of death. Yet might they not provide some semblance of life, a shadowy continuation of that state of awareness and sensation that most of us wish fervently to keep?

*Deprived of life, would you settle for experiencing dreams, some pleasing, some not, disjointed and fantastical as they are, a parade of images and improbable happenings? Would you prefer that to nothing at all? Would you want them for eternity, or just for a while?*

My dreams tend to be mildly frustrating, most often involving trying to reach a destination, the location of which, and means of reaching it, is never clear. Once I'm dead, I would prefer to sleep undisturbed.



#51

**Would You Like to Never Have  
Dreams When You're Sleeping?**

That's the option the Wiz just gave you. If you are like some people I've known, who have night terrors — really scary nightmares — this is a great opportunity to get rid of them. For many others — maybe most people — it might not be so easy to decide. I suspect that most people's dreams tend to be mildly frustrating, like mine. But dreams can be quite pleasant, sometimes so much so that you can feel let-down when you wake up.

*Would you accept the Wiz's offer never to dream again when you're sleeping?*

I would say, "No thanks. I'm content to continue having dreams."

That may sound contradictory to my having said that I'd rather "sleep" undisturbed after I die in the previous thought experiment, but it isn't, because, if I'm still alive, I have a chance for conscious reflection on what I dreamed about after I wake up. My dreams tend to be mildly frustrating, but they are never frightening, and I often find them interesting to think about upon awakening.

I was planning to end what I had to say on this subject with the previous sentence, but reading it over this morning, I realized that a dream I had last night was a perfect example of what I'm talking about. In my dream, I was riding a bicycle in a moderate-sized city in northern Canada (one larger than any city *in* northern Canada). I needed to bike back to Washington State. This nonexistent northern Canadian city was on the north side of a major river, and I was sure that I had to bike across an exceedingly long curving bridge to get to the south side of the river where I would find a road leading in a southwesterly direction toward Washington State. I succeeded in getting across the bridge and heading in the direction of Washington State, but became increasingly doubtful that I was on the right road. I passed a public

building that had something to do with tourism. I thought, maybe they have a map. I went inside and spoke to a woman who seemed to work there. She said that they didn't have a map. "I have to get to Winnipeg," I said. (Note: Winnipeg is nowhere near Washington State.)\* "Oh," she said, "then you'll have to go back across the bridge." This seemed to me to be an exhausting prospect and would take me in the wrong direction to boot. I was still trying to decide what to do next when I woke up. It was a dream that fit perfectly with my normal pattern: "My dreams tend to be mildly frustrating, most often involving trying to reach a destination, the location of which and means of reaching it is never clear."

What was the meaning of this dream? I don't know, but two phrases come to mind: "A bridge to nowhere," and "a bridge too far."

Others have told me that they have had similar dreams. Maybe we're groping our way through life, forever trying to get somewhere, and we don't know why and don't know how to reach our destination.

I wouldn't want to give up the fun of having dreams and speculating about them. Besides, I've read that dreams may have something to do with the brain reorganizing itself, and I'm sure my brain would benefit from that process. I don't mind keeping on dreaming.

---

\* I traveled to northern Canada about forty years ago, not to a city, but to an Inuit village on the north side of a long lake. I traveled through Winnipeg on the way to get there. A few years ago, I had an enjoyable trip to Washington State.

#52

**Would You Be Willing To Be the Next Human  
Baby Born in the World after You Die?**

You don't like the prospect that sooner or later you're going to die. You thought that there would be no alternative, but here's the Wiz, claiming once again that he'll give you a special deal. He promises that you'll live out your predestined lifespan regardless of whether or not you accept his offer. The only thing that will change is that you'll have a chance to live a whole new life: You can be the next baby born in the world after you die. You'll have no memory of your past life, but you will have something that you wouldn't have otherwise: a second life after your first one ends.

*Given that so many people in the world have burdensome disabilities, or live in chronic pain, or live in poverty or in countries ruled by repressive regimes or wracked by war, there's a fairly high probability that your second life might be one marked by ignorance, hardship, and misery. Nonetheless, the opportunity to have a second life is intriguing. Will you accept the Wiz's offer?*

I'm aware that I was born into much luckier circumstances than the vast majority of humans living today, and the odds would likely be far less favorable if I were a random new baby coming into the world.

Even so, I like the idea of being alive enough to be inclined to accept the Wiz's offer. If you feel that way too, remember that you can't bring any of your experience, skills, and understanding of the world into your new life. You'll arrive as a squawking helpless baby, who may or may not have a life that you would find agreeable from your present perspective.

A disturbing thought came to my mind: Would saying "No" to the Wiz be the equivalent of saying that for the average person life is not worth living? I don't think it would, because, once you're alive, it's instinctive to want to stay alive, to feel that life is worth living even when facing great

hardships. If I accept the Wiz's offer, my second life might not be worth living from my present standpoint, but it would be from my standpoint as a new living being. That's why, on reflection, and realizing that it may be wildly imprudent, if I had no choice other than being dead, I would accept the Wiz's offer to be the next baby born.

Sometime after writing the previous sentence, it occurred to me that if I declined the Wiz's offer, it might signify that I didn't think it would be a good thing for *anyone* to be the next baby born in the world, and if that's the case, it would be best if no more babies were born. That's such a dispiriting thought that it may be the true reason I said that I would accept the Wiz's offer — maybe the only reason.

**The (Infamous) Two Children Problem  
(The Two-Child Problem); (The Two-Child Paradox)**

The Wiz has a beneficent smile on his face when he magically appears in front of you, interrupting you when you were absorbed reading this book.

“Oh my gosh,” you say. “What brings you here?”

“Nothing but a way for you to make a million dollars by solving a simple problem.”

“Now, Wiz,” you reply. “Is this another too-good-to-be-true deal you’re offering?”

“Not at all,” the Wiz says. “If you’re not interested-”

“I *am* interested,” you interrupt. “But, in view of our past history, you can’t blame me for being skeptical. What’s the simple problem?”

“Note this first. For the purposes of this problem, assume that there are equal numbers of boys and girls in the world. Got that?”

“Got it — equal numbers of each.”

“Then here it is: Imagine that *while you are out walking, you meet a couple with one of their two children. Their other child is at home. The child with them is a girl (G). What are the odds that their child at home is a boy (B)?*”

“This *is* easy,” you say. “It’s common knowledge that the gender of a couple’s first child isn’t the slightest bit predictive of the gender of their second child. Since you said to assume that there are equal numbers of girls and boys, there’s no reason that the child who was left at home is more likely to be a girl or a boy. Therefore, the odds are one in two — fifty-fifty — that the child at home is a boy (B).”

You let that sink in, and can’t help grinning as you say, “I’m ready to receive my million dollars.”

“You haven’t won it yet,” the Wiz says. “According to Professor Horace Bandwidth, who is a highly regarded mathematician, the odds are two-in-three that the child at home is a boy (B).”

Instantly, Professor Bandwidth appears before you, grinning as broadly as you were before he arrived.

“You’re wrong,” Bandwidth says, jabbing a finger at you as if you had committed a crime. “Here’s the mathematical proof:

“Among all couples with two children, there are equal numbers of GG, GB, BG, and BB couples. Since the couple you met has a G with them, she is clearly not in the BB group. She must therefore be in either GG, the GB, or the BG group. Since there are equal numbers in each group, the odds are  $1/3$  that she is one of the two Gs in the GG group,  $1/3$  that she is the G in the BG group, and  $1/3$  that she is the G in the GB group. If she is the G in the GG group, then her sibling at home is a G. If she is the G in the BG group or the G in the GB group, in each case her sibling at home is a B. In one case, the child at home is a G. In two cases the child at home is a B. Therefore, the odds are  $2/3$  that the child at home is a B.”

“That can’t be right!” you protest.

“Sorry, but it *is* right,” Professor Bandwidth says severely. “It may go against your intuition, but intuitions may be faulty, whereas a mathematical proof is irrefutable!”

Rather than reply, you sit quietly, trying to work this puzzle through. Professor Bandwidth’s proof does seem to be irrefutable. But it also seems wrong!

“You still have a chance to win that million bucks,” the Wiz says gently, “but you’ll have to show that Professor Bandwidth is wrong.”

“And *that* will be impossible,” Bandwidth says. “I am never wrong.”

*Can you show that you are right in saying there’s a one-in-two chance that the child at home is a boy, rather than a two-in-three chance, as Professor Bandwidth claims he has proved?*

If you figured out why Professor Bandwidth’s “proof” is not a proof at all, proceed to the cashier’s window and collect the million dollars the Wiz promised. Although Bandwidth’s reasoning was rigorously logical, it rested on the false premise that because, among all couples with two children there are equal numbers of GG, GB, BG, and BB couples, when you meet a couple who is out walking with one of their two children and the child with them is a G, that the couple is equally likely to be a GG, a BG, or a GB couple.

To see why this isn't the case, imagine that you are walking in a park. Living near the park are 50 GG couples, 50 GB couples, 50 BG couples, and 50 BB couples. All 200 of these couples have gone out walking in the park with one of their children and left the other one at home. You meet one of these couples, and they have a G with them. Obviously, you haven't met one of the BB couples. You've met one of the 50 GG couples, one of the 50 GB couples, or one of the 50 BG couples.

Of the 50 GG couples, all 50 of them who have gone out walking with a G have left a G at home. Of the 50 GB couples, 25 have gone out walking with their G and left their B at home, and 25 have gone out walking with their B and left their G at home; and the same is true of the 50 BG couples. Since the couple you meet has a G with them, it must be one of the 50 GG couples who went out walking with a G and left a G at home, one of the 25 GB couples who went walking with their G and left their B at home, or one of the 25 BG couples that went walking with their G and left their B at home. Therefore, you met one of 50 GG couples who left a G at home or one of 50 BG and GB couples that went walking with their G and left their B at home. Therefore, the odds are 50-50 (1 in 2) that the child at home is a B, not 2 in 3, as Professor Bandwidth insists is the case. What appeared to be a paradox — the inconsistency between the common sense answer and a mathematical proof — is resolved once it's clear that a false assumption crept into Professor Bandwidth's analysis.

The lesson of The Infamous Two Children Problem is that although you can't always trust your intuition, you shouldn't let the certainty of a mathematical proof deter you from examining the premise or premises on which it is based.

## #54

### **If You Could Save The Life of Only One of These Three People, Whose Life Would You Save?**

In George Bernard Shaw's play *The Doctor's Dilemma*, first produced in 1906, a doctor has time and resources to save only one of two patients entrusted to his care. The play borders on farce and has too many idiosyncratic aspects to be instructive, but reading it last summer caused me to reflect on its subject. Hospital emergency rooms and doctors have triage protocols, but suppose you found yourself in a situation where you could save the life of only one of three individuals, and you have only a scrap of information about each of them:

Person A is a 30-year-old unmarried policeman who recently risked his life to save three people from drowning in a flash flood.

Person B is a 20-year-old woman artist, also single, who critics say is destined for greatness. Despite her youth, a major museum just bought one of her paintings.

Person C is a 10-year-old boy, who looked up at you with soulful eyes. He seems to understand that his life is in your hands.

*Assuming you know nothing else about these individuals and you have only time and resources to save the life of one of them, whose life would you save?*

I can't imagine any triage protocol that would provide a satisfying answer to this question. The policeman is something of a hero — his life is certainly worth saving. But could I turn away from the ten-year-old boy who looked at me with soulful eyes? And, since I have a keen appreciation of fine art, I would not want the life of this gifted young painter to slip away.



I suspect that, like most people faced with this dilemma, I would reach a decision based on feeling rather than on rational analysis, a result explained by the 17th Century mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal: “The heart has its reasons, which reason cannot know.”

**You Are the Dictator of Policy with Regard to  
Treatment of Animals Bred and Raised for  
Agricultural Purposes in the United States**

Once again the Wiz has surprised you, this time by bestowing on you dictatorial power throughout the United States with regard to standards and treatment of animals bred and raised for agricultural purposes. It will take awhile for you to review policy considerations and draft a practical and humane statute, and the Wiz advises you not to rush it.

“You need to think things through,” he says. “You might first consider whether such animals must be raised in circumstances in which they can move about comfortably, be allowed to develop normally, and are protected against force feeding, mutilations, cruel methods of slaughtering, and other practices that, if imposed on humans, would be considered to be forms of torture. Practices such as these are common on ‘factory farms.’ That sounds bad, but as a result, food is more plentiful and less expensive than it would be if produced on traditional family farms. Fewer people go hungry. Children who might otherwise be malnourished get enough to eat. But Is it worth it? Is it right? Should such conditions be allowed?

*Would whatever law you institute reflect the view that animals raised for agricultural purposes shouldn't be subjected to prolonged pain and suffering for the benefit of humans, or the view that concern for animal pain and suffering must give way to preventing human deprivation and hardship? Or do you see a way to avoid this unappealing trade-off?*

I don't think we need to regard ourselves as protectors of animals, but I think we have an ethical obligation to not make their lives more painful and unpleasant than they would typically be in a state of nature. Animals should not be raised in circumstances in which they can't move about comfortably, are prevented from developing normally, or subjected to force feeding, mutilations, cruel methods of

slaughtering, and other practices that, if imposed on humans, would be considered to be forms of torture.

I think that humans have as much right as foxes to kill chickens for food, but foxes don't cause chickens to suffer for most of their lives before they die, and neither should we. I think that the economic cost of requiring that farm animals are treated humanely should be offset by instituting a more progressive taxation and subsidy structure, rather than by ignoring our ethical responsibilities to our fellow creatures.

### **Create Your Own Advisor**

Before making a major decision, it's wise to assess the situation as objectively as you can. Unless you have a trusted and capable confidante on hand — someone who understands your needs and goals and won't pander to your haphazard desires — the best way to achieve objectivity may be to create your own advisor.

There are numerous forms of this technique of “standing aside” in an attempt to observe yourself objectively. It's a feature of Buddhist insight meditation, business management consulting, and disputes mediation. A friend of mine who is a retired psychotherapist advocates creating an advisor who is standing on a balcony, watching you. Her thinking may be that this elevated position invests the advisor with added authority.

I felt that my advisor should have authority and as much objectivity as possible, and to achieve that, she should see my situation from a distance. The greater the distance, the better — like from another world. Better yet, if you'll excuse this fanciful excursion, from another universe! Such an arrangement is easy to set up thanks to the “many worlds” interpretation of quantum mechanics.

According to this theory, whenever you decide between making decision A and decision B, you split into two people, one in a universe in which you make decision A and the other in a universe where you make decision B. This theory doesn't have to be true, nor do I have to have adequately described it, for you to imagine that such a thing has happened to you, and that you have split into two persons, and that one of them (you-B), after spending some time in another universe gaining objectivity, returns to our universe, specifically to the planet Earth, and takes a fly-on-the-wall view of what is happening in the life of you-A, who continued to exist after the split and was unaffected by it, as if it had never happened.

If you're feeling skeptical about this, remember that you-B is no more than an artifice you've created and want to make as vivid and present as possible. You don't want an advisor who fades out of your consciousness when most needed!

Fortunately, your advisor ( you-B) is even better positioned than the fly-on-the-wall who is watching you (you-A). Being a faithful copy of you before you split into two people, you-B continues to have all the knowledge you-A

had before the split, and you-B thinks, sees, reads, and hears everything that you-A does, and you-B is aware of you-A's conscious thoughts: You (as you-B) are positioned to be a uniquely objective advisor to you — the person who, as you think of it, you really are.

*What impressions do you (as you-B) form about you-A from your out-of-you-A's-body perspective? Take a good look at you-A (yourself) from your privileged vantage point. Imagine your advisor (you-B) asking you, "How well are you doing at living? What, if anything, have you been doing right? What, if anything, have you been doing wrong? Are you staying awake and aware, reflecting, and deliberating as necessary? Or have you been failing to be self-monitoring, lacking impulse control, and, in effect, sleepwalking through life?"*

I can recall important occasions when I made a stupid decision that I would almost certainly have avoided if I had created an advisor who was attentive to my thought processes. To cite one such folly — by no means the most disastrous — when I was a few years out of law school, unhappily enmeshed in the soulless machinery of a gigantic Wall Street law firm, I was offered a chance to be interviewed for an opening at a small high quality firm. If accepted — and there was a good chance that I would be since a highly respected lawyer had recommended me — I would have had immediate increased responsibility and would benefit from close mentoring by a first-class lawyer. My psychic state at the time would best be described as *numb*. I said I wasn't interested.

If I had created an advisor at that point in my life, I'm sure she would have said something like, "You're not going anywhere in the job you're in. This could be the break you need." And I bet she would have added, "Even If you don't get the job, being interviewed for it will be instructive, and you'll make a new contact." It would have been helpful if she'd only said, "*Hey, you. Wake up!*"

Creating your own advisor is an instrument of self-reflection, a way of thinking from a fresh perspective. I've been making better decisions since I created mine.

---

\*Hugh Everett, the postgraduate student who thought up the many worlds theory of quantum mechanics, was almost laughed off the campus after proposing it, but he did earn his PhD at Princeton after his professors belatedly realized that there might be something to it, and that, at the very least, it was brilliant.

## #57

### **Hundreds of Years after You Die, You Come Back to Life but Only for an Hour**

Here's the way it happens. You're suddenly conscious of being well-dressed and sitting in a comfortable chair in a tastefully furnished, well-lit, windowless room and feeling alert and healthy in every respect. The Wiz is in a matching chair a few feet away. He's smiling at you as if he's pleased to see you.

You struggle to clear your brain — to consider how this can be happening. The last thing you remember is that you were lying in bed in a hospice, knowing that you were about to die. Then nothing.

*How long ago did that happen? How is it you're alive now?*

The Wiz, mind-reading you, says: "I can understand why you're puzzled. You died hundreds of years ago. I brought you back to life, but just for an hour so the two of us could have a talk."

You shake your head in astonishment. You remember some weird miracles the Wiz pulled off when you were alive before, but this is the weirdest of all, and it's not making you happy.

"Am I supposed to be grateful for this?" you say, "It's not exactly a picnic coming back to life if I know I'll be dead again in an hour!"

"I understand your feeling completely, but bear with me," the Wiz says. "It's only because you've been dead so long that I'm able to show you how this life-and-death business that humans experience is set up in the best possible way."

"You're telling me that because hundreds of years have passed since I died, everything is rosy?"

The Wiz gazes at you with an expression that reminds you of the Mona Lisa. "Not that it's rosy, and not that it's not rosy," he says. "I simply want you to see your life from the perspective you have once everyone on Earth who was alive when you died has themselves died, and even farther in the future than that — until not a single person living on Earth knew that you existed. That's how far in the future we've come."

"So, nobody alive today ever knew me or talked to me. Maybe I have descendants who are still living."

"Maybe you do, but you wouldn't know them if you saw them, and if there are any, none of them know anything about you. None of them would have ever heard of you. We're that far in the future."

“I guess I’m lost in the sands of time,” you say ruefully.

“That’s a good way of thinking of it,” the Wiz says, “which is why I put that expression into your head, so you would say it. In any case, looking back from the sands of time, or *through* the sands of time, does the life you led hundreds of years ago seem any more meaningful to you than the lives of your contemporaries?”

“I can remember my life in much, much, more detail than I can remember the life of anyone else.”

“Of course, but at this point, it doesn’t make any difference which of all the lives led back then was *yours*. There’s no reason why the life you led hundreds of years ago should mean more to you now than the life of anyone else living then, or, for that matter, than the life of a fictional character in a novel, a play, or a movie. Now that hundreds of years have passed since you died, you’re capable of looking at the world from an eternal perspective. In that light, your life is no more important or less important than the lives of, for example, Florence Nightingale or Don Quixote. You and they were all instruments of the ever-continuing progression of innumerable events. It doesn’t matter who was who, or even who was real and who was fictional.”

The Wiz pauses for a few seconds, then says: “It *is* odd, isn’t it? Whether the world is better or worse because of your presence in it, once you and everybody who knew you, or might have known you, or known anything about you, is dead, it doesn’t matter whether a certain set of accomplishments or failings were *yours* or those of any one of billions of other people. It’s all smoothed flat.”

*Do you agree with the Wiz that once you and everybody who knew you or might have known you or known anything about you, is dead, it doesn’t matter what your accomplishments or failings were; it’s all smoothed flat?”*

I think that’s a fair statement. It’s as if your life consists in swimming with countless others in one of the Earth’s oceans, waves churning and breaking in all directions around you, and when you die, time carries you up and higher and higher, so that looking down as you rise, the ocean looks smoother and smoother until, when you are far enough away — far enough in the future — it’s all smoothed flat, and the life you lived is no more significant or special than billions of other lives of the living and the dead and of fictional figures who were imagined but never realized except in the minds of beings who were, it turns out, as ephemeral as their creations.

## #58

### **A Brain Scan Reveals that within the Next Twenty-Four Hours You Will Have a Fatal Cerebral Hemorrhage.**

The Wiz just informed you of this, and that there is no way of preventing it.

Pondering this scenario reminded me of the adage, “No one, when dying, wished that they had spent more time at the office.” Immediately thereafter, I thought of the remark attributed to Samuel Johnson: “Depend upon it, sir, when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully.”

According to a life expectancy table I consulted, the average male my age (92) has less than four years to live. That’s a lot more than the two weeks Dr. Johnson spoke of or the twenty-four hours maximum the Wiz gave you, but short enough to engage one’s attention.

The situation posited in this thought experiment would set almost any mind racing. Where would it race to? What concerns and emotions would it unleash? How glaringly wrenching and dismaying would it be? The answers to these questions depend on one’s particular character, personal circumstances, and history. These would combine to form the state of mind that one would have upon hearing such distressing news.

*If you suddenly learned that you were about to die, what would you think about? How would you react?*

When, what, and how one should think about one’s mortality are ancient questions. The Stoics believed that it’s wise to contemplate death well ahead of the event. I suppose their idea was that it’s desirable to be well prepared — to be accepting of death’s inevitability so as not be shocked when it’s staring you in the face. If you have cultivated Stoicism, you might be better able to bear unexpected news that you have less than twenty-four hours to live.

Stoicism is a noble stance, but I prefer that of the 17th century philosopher Baruch Spinoza: “The free man thinks of death, least of all things.”\*



How does one manage that? you might ask. It's a question I'm not qualified to answer, but perhaps I can convey Spinoza's general idea: The path to equanimity and self-control lies in gaining an eternal perspective through knowledge and understanding. This was a philosophy that appealed to Einstein. He said, "I believe in Spinoza's God, who reveals himself in the lawful harmony of all that exists." Like Spinoza, he was in awe of nature and its processes. More than the stupendous aggregation of forms of matter and energy and the laws that govern their motions and interactions, Einstein revered the *mysterious* — what he found to be "subtle, intangible, and inexplicable." \*\*

George Eliot, who translated Spinoza's treatise *Ethics* into English, drank from the same fount of wisdom. A passage in one of her letters is a snapshot of an eternal perspective in the making.

I try to delight in the sunshine that will be when I shall never see it any more. And I think it is possible for this sort of impersonal life to attain greater intensity — possible for us to gain much more independence, than is usually believed, of the small bundle of facts that make our own personality.\*\*\*

I think that, by achieving an eternal perspective through knowledge and understanding and gaining independence from "the small bundle of facts that facts that make our own personality," it's possible to develop a state of mind in which one can face imminent death with equanimity.

A friend, asked to comment on this view, expressed his opinion that "gaining an eternal perspective is a stretch." I think it's true that stretching is required, but that shouldn't hold us back.

---

\* Steven Nadler: *Think Least of Death: Spinoza on How to Live and How to Die*. (2021); P. 126; Princeton Univ. Press

\*\* Walter Isaacson, *Einstein: His Life and Universe* (2008); Simon and Schuster; P. 184; 188.

\*\*\* Clare Carlisle: *The Marriage Question: George Eliot's Double Life*; (2023); P. 189; Farrar, Strauss and Giroux

### **You Are an Earth Inspector**

Imagine that you are a promising young intelligence officer, a member of an extremely advanced species of beings on the planet Cadmus, located a bit more than 1,473 light years from Earth.

Jack — that’s his name, coincidentally a common name for males on Earth, particularly in English-speaking countries — appears on a wall screen in front of you. Jack is Cadmus’s Chief Surveyor of Intelligent Life in the Orion Arm of the Milky Way Galaxy.

Knowing that Jack is seeing you as clearly and intimately as you are seeing him, you assume an attentive posture. This could be the moment you have been hoping for — an assignment to check out a developing situation on a habitable planet.

Yes! That’s exactly why Jack has gotten in touch with you! His perfectly modulated voice comes across:

“We’ve been watching a planet, called Earth by its most advanced inhabitants — humans — for almost a full epoch, what they would measure as several thousand revolutions of their planet around its sun. I was still in Phase BB1 of my life when we last conducted an onsite inspection of this planet. Conditions for humans at that time were generally miserable. The fastest mode of travel required sitting on the back of a quadruped. Fusion energy wasn’t even a dream. Superstitions and myths had more influence on behavior than scientific findings.

“We know from the striking rise in radio emissions from Earth, which we obtained at far faster-than-light speed with our newly developed gravity loop quantum tunneling technique, that humans have made great progress since our last inspection. Based on our studies of comparable developing civilizations, when you visit Earth you can expect to find less slavery and colonial domination, lower rates of impoverishment and violence, and higher rates of literacy and successful medical treatment than obtained at the time of our last inspection. All to the good. But it’s clear from recent data, most notably measurements of increasing

concentrations of CO<sub>2</sub> in Earth's atmosphere, that this planet has entered the parabolic development stage and is likely experiencing the usual problems of accelerating global warming; increasing air and water pollution; dissipation of aquifers; increasing rates of emergence of powerful, oligarchically allied, militarized, imperialist-minded, autocratic governing bodies; increasing risks of nuclear devastation; escalating vulnerability to species-ending pandemics; and, most concerning of all, probable accelerating development of prototypical class two general artificial intelligence."

"*Wa-ooo,*" you exclaim. "I've heard about what that can lead to!"

"What it's already led to in the Cepheus sector," Jack says. "And it could become a real nuisance to us if it flares toward its full potential on Earth. In any case, we need a fine-grained, close-up, virtually synthesized, multi-perspective analysis of the situation, and you have been selected to provide it. You must be ready to leave for your inspection of Earth tomorrow at Beta sun noon. We will provide you with a class A11A multi-enhanced capsule equipped with gravity loop-quantum-tunneling capability for faster-than-light travel. On completion of your mission, we'll expect you to provide us with an omni-factor, full-scale, maximally encrypted report on this interesting planet and the creatures that have been transforming it. Are you up for this assignment?"

*Of course you are! You've dreamed of getting to inspect a planet like Earth ever since you received your first brain enhancement implant!*

## T I M E L A P S E

*Now that you have inspected Earth, what do you think of it?  
Are these humans, as they call themselves, going to make it?*

## AFTERWORD

Recall the first sentence of Thought Experiment #56: “Before making a major decision, it’s desirable to assess the situation as objectively as you can.” This piece of advice assumes that when the need arises for making a major decision, or any significant decision, you’ll be aware that you are about to make it. It was not until late in life that it dawned on me that I undertook some of my worst and most consequential actions without being aware that decision making was involved. Instead, in these instances, I acceded to an impulse without giving thought to likely contingencies and consequences of what I was doing. This phenomenon was brought home to me when I read Christopher Clark’s book — *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War* (2014). Clark shows that in each of the primarily responsible countries, the decision makers acted mindlessly in that they failed to think about the effect that their actions would have on others, which would have led them to consider how others would react.

Clark’s insights initiated my process of learning what it means to be awake and aware, engage in mindful self-monitoring, exercise impulse control, and heed the counsel of the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh to “Keep your awakening alive all day long.” Being mindful of consequences and contingencies improves the odds that one will act wisely. Impressive powers of analysis are useless if you’re a zombie. Thought experiments like the ones in this book help keep me from being one again.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to all who encouraged me and offered comments on this project. Special thanks to my nephew Dr. Andy Packard for supplying the idea for thought experiment #32, to James Burgess for supplying two perfectly suited quotations, and Tim Amsden for copyediting notes. However good this book may be, it's several notches better than it would have been otherwise thanks to my daughter Caroline Packard, who read and commented on all fifty-nine thought experiments and served up dozens of invaluable comments and suggestions. Thank you, Caroline!