

The Great Contradiction

A conversation led by Gideon Broom, first with Gil Berry, then with you.

Copyright © January 2026 Gil Berry

In association with “GB and Others”

For more information, contact gbandothers@gmail.com

Prelude

You are in the strange strip of land where feeling starts to become logic. Behind you is a treeline grazing summer mountains like stubble. Fields fall in the valleys, tended by shedded leaves. Oceans far beyond, and their children, the hot springs, bubbling, having fun with their time on land. It is the most **human** place you can go. It is a beautiful place, but only to you and the other humans. You wonder: why have you gone so far away from it? Because somehow, in that beautiful, natural place— *a gift given to you by your loving parents*— you can’t find rest. There is a desperate satisfaction that eludes you, and which many of the other humans seem to ignore.

So you find yourself leaving the parkland behind and travelling into an abstract realm, where the ground is black and carved with lines drawn with such precision that the artist can’t be anyone but a god. They form a pattern that seems to *accelerate*. Above the ground, cyan, magenta, and yellow objects spin in a surreal, listless daze. The trees and grass have turned into meshes made of polygons. The shading of your world has become a calculation. The sky is a bunch of dazzling pixels. Luckily, it is still bright out. You think to yourself gratefully: at least I can see *something*.

In the direction you head, the ground starts to slope with the increasing number of graphical lines. As you peer and try to see beyond the falling horizon, a character crawls up the slope on all fours. They struggle and heave as they drag themselves like a limp sloth to your feet. All the while, they change forms— a plump woman, a frail man, a tall alien, a squatty boar. Their grunts change shape likewise— hefty, afraid, confident, and hesitant. You flinch as they use your ankle to lift themselves into a standing position, slowly settling their character as a malnourished man with an ample smile.

“I apologize,” he wheezes.

Yet you nearly dragged me down into whatever abyss lies beyond, anyway, you mutter to yourself.

“Call me Gideon, at least for now,” he exclaims in a much bolder voice after recollecting himself, “Why have you come this way?”

You reply, like all conscious people who have left Earth behind, that you are *searching* for a greater truth, one that isn’t full of mere, ant-sized opinions, but objectivity, to settle all suffering and disagreement— *to finally have eternal peace, to reach paradise or utopia*. Eager to be on your way and

leave Gideon behind, you try to push past him, but he revolts back and throws you down onto a seven-sided cylindrical log. It rolls a few times before settling, with you nearly tumbling off it. Unpleased, and slightly frightened by his demeanor, you wish to continue, so you stand up. But again, Gideon shoves you down, even harder this time. While you lie startled, he grabs a cube that floats in the ether and pulls it down onto the ground. He makes sure the ground's friction is working before sitting upon it and lighting the wispy remnants of a charred campfire. The flame glows between you, and he begins:

“I have gone where you think you're going many times,” he pauses, “Let me tell you what I experienced before you go there yourself.”

Chapter I: The Discovery

“I was exposed to dissatisfaction early in my childhood, and perhaps I became imprinted with that as a core trait, hence why my life was spent searching rather than accepting. To be specific, my brother had a disease that was like no other. Science, which had been praised around me as a reliable mother to fall into the arms of when ill or uncertain, like logic and ethos against pathos, was failing us. My brother's case was incurable by what the doctors knew at the time. He was doomed to die, and it felt like those around me did not deserve to be happy, because he couldn't be happy with them. This was only the beginning of an onslaught of injustice that revealed itself to me: it was not just my brother, but brothers and sisters of all humans in every country and of every ethnicity, suffering from edge cases which science had yet to cover. Society had reached its optimum health, and researching fringe cases would cost more lives than it saved.

“To me, this was abysmal. How could we let such a gap in the truth exist? How could we sacrifice some of the world so shamelessly? Of course we mourned once in a while, but every day I still enjoyed a cup of coffee, and I felt guilty because of it.

“Slowly, I realized how much neglect there was among humans, how many unanswered questions previous scientific inquiry had left us. It seemed as if nobody was *really* searching, and that many of those who claimed to be searching were giving it only half a heart, for they valued their time outside that rigorous work, and their own healthy children. This ignorance infuriated me, and I promised to take everything into account from then on.

“Like all great ideas, it started with a feeling— a spike in my chest, a rush of blood to my head. I was still very young when I learnt to put action against my fears, but aren't we the most feisty in those years anyway? So I pounced. The idea was simple: ‘Why?’ It was nothing more than to ask the question ‘Why?’ about everything around me. Then, after all questions were solved, and my brother's disease was no longer mysterious and unknown— then cured because through a solution came a possible action— and all suffering eliminated, I could rest.

You interject: “I'm not sure if I understand— what are you asking ‘Why?’ about?”

“I was asking ‘Why?’ about anything. I was asking why leaves turned brown in the winter. I was asking why the Moon changed shape. I was asking why the Sun disappeared during the night. I was asking why some stars disappeared *forever*. I was asking why humans had fingernails. I was asking why things fell down and not up. I was asking why wires were laid above every street in America. I was asking why metal was so often cold, but then in the odd moment could burn your skin off! *I was asking why people couldn’t get along. I was asking why, for 200 years, a democracy couldn’t find agreement. I was asking why a world that was so old had not yet found paradise.*”

“So a general curiosity?”

“Precisely. Much like you must exhibit, having found you here, I knew nothing except that I wanted to know. Oh, so badly did I just want to *know*! That feeling which began it all was not only one of intense passion but also intense fear. I was scared of living in a world in which I did not have the truth at my disposal. I was desperate for the rules to be revealed and for uncertainty to diminish, for the threat of being an edge case left to die alone to be gone. I needed to solve it all, like a single, massive equation, otherwise I would have been stuck in a severe desolation, like that of a man standing under an awning of yellow light as it pours around him.”

“I feel that as well. It feels as if it is wrong for me to continue onwards to below the horizon, because the story of your experience might bring me that knowledge instead. It might show me a part of myself, it might move me along to something new that was missing from my life— it might complete the whole of me, revealing the part I neglected. In some way, seeking *understanding* is a survivalist technique, wouldn’t you say? Understanding brings safety...”

Gideon nodded. “I would say so, but only to a certain extent.”

“Why’s that?”

“Well, that is a question that will most definitely be answered later. If you pay attention, you will start to understand the universal optimization problem that is life. But let me not get ahead of myself! I must first continue to explain what happened as I repetitively asked ‘Why?’ with so much vehemence that those around me became angered by my constant pestering. I didn’t think and I wasn’t shown that it was annoying when I was very young. In fact, most praised me for my intelligence and my ability to comprehend difficult subjects. I gave them answers, and I saw life bloom. I mastered mathematics and the sciences in tandem. I started drifting, like you, away from the fields, the mountains, the forests, the oceans, and their children, the hot springs. And what encouraged me was that, somewhere along the way, as the leaves on the trees became countable, and the trunks became modelled by curving splines and extruded into polygons, connected by vertex groups. I gathered knowledge from asking continuous questions— sometimes branching into ‘What?’ ‘How?’ ‘Where?’ and so on— actually benefited life around me. It enabled people to live through inventions that gave them experience. So much suffering that plagued our lives was disappearing in the palm of my hands and I was flying, drawing blue skies and tall clouds with matrices.

“Imagine this: we live in a **black box**, and people die all around you in that black box due to some of its mysterious inner-workings. Since a black box is a system, would you not try to disassemble it and figure out how it works so you can prevent that death?”

“I would.”

“I would too, and *I did*. But that black box was *this* world, or more pertinently, this planet. I kept asking questions and getting answers, from every culture and country. I solved parts of the black box, and with each part becoming clearer, I only sought to solve more of it.

“As that ignorant, hopeful youth, I thought I was on track to answer every question anybody had ever tackled. I was a polymath, dabbling in arts by day and trade by night. The grasp of the complete system of this universe was being unwound from its tangled mess. That feeling of pure, untamed belief that it could be solved was the best feeling I ever felt...”

Gideon paused, turning to me with the slightest, melancholic smile dawning under his cheeks. “I’m glad I didn’t know what was ahead, what was past this point we sit at today, where the world appears so abstract we couldn’t tell it or a computer apart. That’s why I stopped you— so unlike me, you at least know what you might be getting into by running farther from nature.”

“It doesn’t feel better to have all the answers to life’s questions?”

Gideon returned to his stiff posture, facing away at the falling horizon. The specular ground carried a placid reflection of his composure.

He began, but ignored my question: “There was a point when the effects of my discovered solutions started to diminish. Fewer and fewer lives were being saved by the cures I found, and fewer and fewer people came to thank me like a god. Regardless, I had hoped that at the end of the tunnel was a light so magnificent it would finally let me sleep without a dream in my heart. And so, I kept pushing; I kept solving, and the shapes that were in my hands were still filling the holes right in front of me.

“Similar to you, I had a high tolerance for diving into the unknown compared to most other scientists. Again, that’s what led us out here. We could not stop halfway, we could not stop with a cure that worked only *most* of the time. We are heavy people, with an unruly amount of momentum. These blocks we sit on are not like the chairs you will find at the dining table. The pillows we will sleep on are not like the ones in a crib.

“As you go further, everything becomes harder. And I went as far as possible. My questions were tireless, and the gravitational pull only became stronger, the lines on this ground denser.

“I noticed a pattern: my questions always spawned new questions. Never did I encounter a strict wall. One answer would lead to another, until I... I realized I was running out of time, having overworked myself on countless nights, refusing to sleep, and my body was getting tired. The imminence of death was revealed, and I needed to go faster if my childhood dream of complete understanding was to be accomplished. In short, *I had to make predictions*. I had to recognize the

pattern of eternal questions that I was facing, for I did not have eternity to ask questions. This was the moment my scientific inquiry fled from the practical and into the metaphysical, hidden phenomena of the world, far away from our senses. It was no longer ‘Why is the Earth constructed out of these elements?’ but ‘Why is there something rather than nothing?’ The questions rang louder in my head like sirens until I finally felt the first sign of...

“*The Great Contradiction.*”

“It specifically arrived in the form of the **Socratic Paradox**, which is what occurs when the ‘Why?’s never end. It is the fact that, as I assumed I was becoming more intelligent, the more that I didn’t know became ever apparent. The universe had blossomed in complexity, the black box had me more befuddled than ever. And all those around me had no idea. My humility was shocked, and I became like **Socrates** himself, thinking I was the most humble and willing to admit I knew much less, while those around me boasted that they thought they had a good grasp on the world. In the words of the man himself, ‘I knew that I knew nothing.’ In fact, it was the only thing I could know, and it was a paradox that was undefinable.”

“So you reached this point of being— metaphorically speaking— completely lost? Where the only truth that you found was one that didn’t hold any truth at all?”

“Precisely! You know, I see a part of myself in you. I see it in everyone, nowadays, really.”

You smiled briefly as he said that.

“Where were we?” he asked, regathering himself after complimenting you.

“You had just described your first encounter with a paradox, or... contradiction.”

“Yes! I am quite excited now. It feels like I actually know something when I tell memories aloud,” Gideon chuckled, “It’s like I’m creating existence by speaking. Anyway, my first encounter was one of the toughest times of my life. I was way out in the abstract realm, so far that I could practically see the contradiction through closed eyelids. The best way to describe it was that everything was burnt down around me, and I was the sole survivor of the fire, swimming in a pool of water encircled by oil, my arms in the air to prop up a flower from drowning. I was mentally strained and holding onto life by a thread, and to those around me, I appeared disillusioned, just as Socrates did when he appeared in court.

“Suddenly, everything started to fold in on itself in an exponential manner, and the lines etched into the ground became so dense that they could not be told apart. I started to see one key fact and one key fact only: *everything* was absorbed in a Fundamental Contradiction.”

“Is this what you meant by the Great Contradiction? Is the Fundamental Contradiction the same as the Great Contradiction?”

“In a way, yes. I only call it the Great Contradiction because it frames it better. We humans love magnificent ideas, knowledge that makes us feel small.”

“But the more practical term is Fundamental Contradiction?”

“It is. I apologize for the confusion— please refer to it either way. The simplest form to call it is *the* contradiction, but that can sometimes get confusing in explanations.”

“Got it. Sorry for interrupting, and please continue your story.”

“No problem at all, truly. It is through discourse like this that ideas are best understood. To hear me ramble on would do neither of us any good. Unfortunately, the stars are becoming visible and the sky is nearly no longer violet. We should rest. I’ll leave the campfire on to keep us warm— it can be freezing out here.”

Gideon lowered himself onto the ground and slouched on the block, his hands resting upon one another as he began to doze off. With his eyes closed, he said, “I’ll hope you’re here in the morning. Try not to wander off too far tonight— it might be dangerous before you hear what I have to tell you next. Goodnight, you.”

Interlude I

Gideon was right. Away from the designated campsites, there are no blankets, no layers of bristle, no shade from the moonlight— just a cold, hard ground— a ground that tilts and makes you dizzy, that requires effort to sit up and see if the horizon finally dawns the soft morning light.

You couldn’t sleep here, and you haven’t during the days or years it took you to get here. Each night it seems like rest is further away, even though you believe you are heading towards the spot of ultimate rest. Perhaps it is just an equation, that the unrest you put in is the rest you get out— eternal unrest for eternal rest. It’s balanced, it follows the axioms.

Around midnight, with the half-moon precessing above you, you finally get up and decide sleep is impossible. You wander towards the dipping horizon, towards where the lines in the ground become closer together. You notice that the objects floating beside you resemble nature less and less, in both shape and color. Everything becomes so abstracted that this might as well be another universe, another *dream*.

Then, as you glance around in mesmerizing circles, the objects seem to disappear when you stop looking at them. If they come back when you glance again, they come back differently. It feels like someone is trying to memorize the world for you and hastily keep continuity alive.

Even further, some objects turn into gravestones. Engraved in them are the names of the things they used to be: trees, fields, mountains, oceans, and hot springs. The graves become denser, like all things, as you teeter on the edge of the slope. So much so that after a while, the graves become an obstacle that slows you down.

Afraid, you run back to Gideon’s camp and tuck yourself in beside the fire, shivering from the strength of the cold. While grasping the blanket, you squint a few times in an attempt to force yourself asleep, but all you can focus on is how your hand changes color with each opening of the eye. And

likewise, the ground swiftly changes from black to white, the grooves inverting with it. And too, the campfire momentarily flickering a deep cyan, in between swashes of pale orange.

Chapter II: The Justification

In the morning, Gideon is sitting upright with his hands hovering above the fire, which is once again orange. He assumes you are still eager to learn more about where he went and what is beyond the horizon.

“So there I was, looking at everything with a view nobody had expressed before, out here alone. Keep in mind, everything I tell you is from when I first discovered what was beyond the trees.

“Everyone but me always claimed that something was either true or not true. Everyone claimed that there was either something *or* nothing. There were both nihilists and absurdists, physicalists and idealists, but not one person but me who claimed both were true at once— nobody claimed that the two could coexist. I mean, how could they? For that to be reality was a wild idea to propose, especially in that lowly world where opinions and hustle were idealized. Looking back on it, how could we have gone so long without attempting that third option? To me, it almost seemed obvious at the time, but I suppose the answer to this question will be covered later— I’ll leave it until then. Let me first detail all the intriguing places I saw the Fundamental Contradiction demonstrated.

“Like many who seek to understand the most solid nature of the universe, I looked into ancient philosophy early in my days of asking questions. It was there that I discovered Socrates, and also discovered the philosophy of **Taoism**.”

“Would you mind explaining a little bit of Taoism? I’m familiar with some of it but have forgotten much of what I knew.”

“Taoism holds the tenet of paradox core to its belief. They describe opposing forces as mutual and necessary— you cannot have one force without the other. Balance, at all times, is necessary.

“When the world was split on its head, debating over topics where no consensus could be agreed upon, I wondered: what was absolute truth? And then, thinking along the lines of contradiction, I realized that there was neither an absolute truth nor an absolute truth— there simply was both.



The Yin-Yang

“The **Yin-Yang** depicts this beautifully. Without black, there is no white— they must coexist. Taoism is uncoincidentally similar to the Great Contradiction. They draw from the same absolutes, but aren’t precisely the same. The core feature that the drawing and Taoism see differently is that reality, along the lines of the Fundamental Contradiction, is actually composed of the black and the white layered on top of each other, in the same position, at the same time, while Taoism has each color to the side of one another.”

“But if the image you’re describing is true reality, then why can’t I visualize that image? I can only see the black and white next to each other at best. It’s like imagining another color...”

“Ah! That is a classic dilemma, which I am hoping will get cleared up when I talk about what it means for something to ‘collapse.’”

“Like to fall down?”

“No— collapse in this situation means ‘to settle.’ A teaser is that although true reality consists of the colors on top of each other, ‘collapse’ is when only one color is seen, either black or white.”

“Does this ‘collapse’ have to do with quantum mechanics, as in the wave function collapsing? I’ve heard of it, but I don’t see the connection it has to this in any way, and I also don’t entirely understand the physics behind it.”

“Don’t worry— you’re on the right path and it is also okay to not understand all the physics behind it, though we will clear some more of it up soon enough. For now, assume I am speaking in an even further abstracted realm than that in which we sit. In this new realm, all moments of time are combined into one. This way, if you put the black side of the Yin-Yang in a certain position in one moment of time, then move the white side of the Yin-Yang to that position afterwards, the resulting image will be a collage of the two overlaid. But of course, we are children of time-”

“-so we can’t visualize the image,” you said, finishing Gideon’s sentence.

“Precisely. We live within the time dimension. Without it, there is nothing to experience. Remember that this is metaphysical talk. We will apply this to our lives later, but what you must take away now is that the Great Contradiction is impossible to directly experience in a single moment of time.

“After studying Taoism, I started to see a theme of balance in the nature of logic and truth. All arguments had a counterargument, all laws had edge cases that would betray an unlucky few— just like how the medicine we tried to treat my brother’s disease never worked, even though they claimed it helped those who were sick. I couldn’t help but see a practical injustice while living in time, as if everything had become false advertising. Because of people’s attachment to their personal truths, the truths of others on the other side of the Yin-Yang, living in a different time or space, were disregarded. This was frustrating, since I too was imprinted with many truths I did not want to let go. Even the most agreeable truths, like those that protected peace and prosperity, were left in shambles, for

somewhere in the universe I could see a planet where they no longer reigned true. And so, a great peril dawned upon me, and for the first time since embarking on my journey to discover the absolute nature of this universe, I was left *stunned*. That being said, I was *only* beginning to slip down the horizon's slope. As you will see, the consequences of the contradiction can be horrifying when viewed from someone on the dark side of it."

"What do you mean by the 'dark side' of it?"

"The Fundamental Contradiction obeys itself. It is as beneficial to us as it is useless; it is as good as it is evil. While learning about it, I found that I consistently viewed it from the dark side. I fell into a depression so complete that I could feel my limbs dying. Again, I will describe this in more detail later, but the important part to know is that from every angle, there is still something bright shimmering, however far in the distance. I ignored it at first, but after many years I found a clarity that rejuvenated me, and after being dragged into the deepest pits of despair, I was given that paradise.

"It was apparent how my view of the Great Contradiction was context-dependent. Truths that should have contradicted each other flipped based on where I was in the world, or where I was in time. I would notice that through a change in my dimensions, things I once thought were false or horrible became true or magical. My tastebuds changed routinely, and I periodically went from enjoying orange marmalade to strawberry jam and so on. Some truths would take decades to flip while others took mere days. Certainties I once clung onto were being pried out of my hands with a force that refused to die. Whenever I said a statement that I thought was true, a voice in the back of my head started whispering to me, pleading with me to ask 'Why?' a million times. And when I rigorously investigated my own statements, I found that the inverse statement— the logical negation— was just as true. So which one should I have told my friends? Which advice should I have given? Ultimately, it was the time I was allowed for contemplation, or the freedom to visit a new country and culture with different laws, that gave me the ability to change my views so poignantly.

"As my previously logical thought process fell to this disastrous way of thinking, I found myself trying to search for the one that didn't contradict itself. I looked all over, crossing rugged, cold planes with denser and curvier lines, just to find nothing. I couldn't say for sure that anything was true, except this:

*"The only **truth** is that there is no truth.*

"If you may, unravel that statement in time for me, like our example with the Yin-Yang."

You sat up straight. "Okay... er— first we propose that there is one truth (as from 'the only truth...' part), therefore we declare that truth exists. However, the next moment we contradict ourselves by saying that there is no truth. This scenario seems physically impossible— is this another part of the contradiction?"

"Yes. Do you see how time allowed you to first claim there was a truth and then next claim there wasn't?"

“I do.”

“Do you also see how, based on the speed of your thoughts, the truth was able to flip in a spiral fashion as you attempted to justify the statement? Try it for yourself again, but try to make five statements instead of your previous two.”

“The only truth (my first statement) is that there is no truth (my second statement), therefore that is the absolute truth (my third statement) but can't be an absolute since there is no truth (my fourth statement), but saying that fourth statement I have just declared that statement is the only truth (my fifth statement)... I feel like I could go on forever.”

“If you're quick, you can.”

“This really hurts my brain.”

“Of course it will— *we are creatures of time.*”

“At first, I was baffled by how this could be the fundamental law of the universe, but as the 20th century progressed, and modern **physics** made more beautiful discoveries, it started to make more sense why the only law of the universe was one we couldn't even state out loud.

“Most notably, I saw it in **quantum mechanics**. Let me go back to the ‘collapse’ of the ‘**wave function**’ to begin. Think of a wave function as a signal containing an infinite amount of one-dimensional information. For example, a wave function could mathematically represent a single spatial axis of our universe, or it could represent the temporal axis. At each infinitesimal step in the function, there is a number representing some information that is stored at that point. The wave function is always normalized, meaning that the infinite sum, or integral, or area under its curve, sums to exactly 1. The reason this is so is because the wave function represents the probability of an event being at a certain position. The information it stores is probability. If you are trying to see whether the event will happen in between positions 0 and 100, you sum the values of the wave function from 0 to 100. If you want to see if the event even exists from negative infinity to positive infinity, you sum the entire wave function. Since the event *must* exist when looking over the scope of the entire dimension, the probability of it being between negative infinity and positive infinity is 1, or a complete chance of finding it.

“For the sake of clarity, let's use the example that we have a spatial wave function representing where a person might be in the universe. With the wave function alone, we only have likelihoods of where the person might be, and no exact location.”

“I'm quite lost— how does this connect back to the fundamental contradiction? And you still haven't covered what ‘collapsing the wave function’ is.”

“In simplest terms: before collapse, the great contradiction is all that could exist in that ineffable realm of probabilities. After the collapse, we come to fruition. We...” Gideon said, lifting his arm in the air and clasping his hands together, rubbing them and feeling the gristly callouses of his skin, “*We are here, in a single position.*”

“But how does collapse happen? How do we go from many probable positions to just *one* of the many probable positions?”

“That...” he paused, putting his hands back on his lap, “That is something I have confidence our physicists will discover within the next century. I do not know the answer, but there are a few theories that other scientists are currently developing. All you need to know is that the true, absolute nature of the universe is made of dimensions and their wave functions, and the reality we see is the collapsed versions of them.

“You will have to bear with me as I try to explain two things that I believe are missing from your knowledge:

“One: How the great contradiction relates to raw wave functions.

“Two: What collapsing does to the information of the true universe.

“First, let me add a new word to your vocabulary: singularity. We’ve all heard it before, and while it seems it has many different pseudo-scientific definitions, they all culminate in a similar meaning: an unlivable state. Singularity, in terms of the artificial intelligence doomsday, is when humans are no longer the smartest creature on the planet. The term becomes more complicated when you introduce artificial general intelligence, but that is not worth our time. The important part to take away from this is that humans no longer become useful, therefore have no reason to exist, when the singularity happens.

“In physics, a singularity is a point in spacetime where our current understanding of physics breaks down because many quantities become infinite. Many believe this is a sign our physical theories are incomplete, but I believe there is some negligence in that statement (although our physical theories are most definitely incomplete). But again, we see that a singularity is a destruction of *something* human, which is, in this case, human knowledge.

“Essentially, *I can use singularity interchangeably with paradox, and likewise interchangeably with contradiction.*

“To see why this is so, let me backtrack to the first of those two questions I proposed were missing from your knowledge: how the great contradiction relates to what I just said about collapsing wave functions.

“In a singularity, quantities like distance and time become infinite. The spatial length of your existence is infinite if abiding by the rules of the great contradiction. You can think of it like walking on an infinite plane.”

“Is that not what we might already experience?” you replied, “Who knows if the universe is infinite or not?”

“How do you believe we can quantify the universe as infinite or not?”

“With experimentation, like all science would.”

“And to do an experiment we would gather data through observation, unless you want to ‘feel’ your way to infinity, which seems practically more difficult than looking towards it.”

“Of course, we would use our eyes to see, or optical instruments.”

“And they can only see the observable universe’s limit.”

“But that doesn’t mean it’s finite.”

“Precisely— it also doesn’t mean it’s infinite. So for the time being, just think of the world as a two-dimensional place: one infinite axis of space and one axis of time that allows you to move. You begin at the origin, or at least what you *perceive* as the origin, as it is an arbitrary point with no marker in a space where *you* are the only event. Are you following?”

“Yes, I am at the origin and on each side of me is infinity.”

“Perfect. So where do you walk to?”

“I walk towards the only destination I know, probably: infinity.”

“Excellent! Even more perfect! So you walk towards infinity, setting that as your target. Now imagine you are impatient, and that you want to measure the distance between you and your destination. Let’s say there is some magical measuring stick that you place between you and your destination, to make it easy. Obviously, it must measure infinity. This worries you, so you start to run faster, as I did with my questions— I asked over and over again, pleading for there to be at least something I could know and that didn’t fall to the contradiction. Jog to infinity! Sprint to infinity! But you are going nowhere, because all the way the distance becomes a more concrete measurement, a more assured one with time— infinity, infinity, infinity... You sprint even faster, but then it dawns upon you: how is speed even measured? Of course, it takes the change in distance and divides by the time. But the only location you can use as a reference is still infinitely far away, a constant distance, and so no change in distance is occurring, meaning, by definition, you are not moving. You are sitting still, yet sprinting at the same time.”

Gideon let out a maniacal laugh, slouching in his armchair afterwards.

“That was where it all began. That was the first example that bridged two things that used to feel ever apart— physics and ancient philosophy— and showed me that as much as this world makes perfect sense, it makes absolutely no sense at all. The contradiction was what the bridge was built upon.”

He smirked and asked if everything was okay, how you were feeling. You were both nervous yet curious in the infinitesimal moment. You were both excited yet unbelievably frightened.

“So there I was,” he continued, “Troubled by realizing that if the universe was infinite, I would be sitting still and moving at the same time. It was not that from infinity came contradiction, or that from contradiction infinity was born, but that infinity and contradiction were mutually tied. They could not be derived from each other, but instead swam around each other like Koi fish. Relate this back to the Yin-Yang, if you are feeling introspective.”

“Wasn’t this supposed to be the explanation of how the Great Contradiction relates to wave functions? I’m only seeing how the Great Contradiction relates to infinity...”

“It is— I just haven’t assigned definitions yet. Let’s start by recalling that a one-dimensional wavefunction represents the probability of an event happening in a location on a single axis. There can be multidimensional wave functions, with the fourth-dimensional wave function representing the four axes of our universe— time and the three spatial dimensions. Let’s stick with the one-dimensional wave function as it is the easiest to use in examples, and all knowledge derived from it can be extrapolated to higher dimensions through mathematics.

“I should also mention that I left something out when I first mentioned wave functions: if a wave function is infinite, the probability density at any point along an axis must fall to zero, for if it were nonzero and went on forever, how would it sum to only one? It would have to be infinitely greater. Infinity breaks finite math, of course! It sounds obvious when saying it out loud. Everything breaks down! Just as in a singularity, just as in a paradox, just as in a contradiction!”

“So how do we ‘collapse’ from the wave function if the probability is *intangible*?”

“*Intangible* is a nice word, and one that my experience relates to heavily. The great contradiction is ever far away, untouchable by humans. To answer how the wave function collapses, we can simply state an alternate definition of ‘collapse’: it is when the infinite becomes finite. Think of our single infinite spatial dimension, and now imagine it as a loop, wrapping around to tie into itself. Now, with that band— or bracelet, in other imaginings— of existence, slice a quarter of it and give it to one person, then slice another quarter, sometimes overlapping and sometimes completely separate, and give it to another person. That finite portioning of something once infinite brings truth to fruition, although in the grand scope of things, the truth each person is given is localized and not absolute.”

“So taking a finite part of an infinite dimension is similar to a wave function collapsing?”

“Yes.”

“That makes sense, sort of, but I don’t understand how you connected to truth and what you meant by ‘each person getting part of the bracelet.’”

“Truth is born out of the finite. Do you remember how we stated that the only truth is that there is no truth? And how we said that collapsing can be thought of as just taking one half of that statement? Think of that statement as a bracelet that loops around initially (as it did in your attempted justification of it), and collapsing it cuts it in half. Now, one person might think that there is truth in this world, and another person might think there is no truth.

“In relation to what we just said, for something to be true, it must be definable. An undefinable thing has no chance of being true. Let’s say I have ten marbles in my hand. I can count them and see through observation that the statement that ‘I have ten marbles in my hand’ is true. Now let’s say I have infinite marbles in my hand, but I don’t know that yet— I have to count them first. We

are finite creatures, and we will die before we count all the marbles, meaning we can never say with complete certainty— pure truth— that we had infinite marbles in our hand.

“It is taking that infinite band and only looking at part of it that allows us to define things. We can define the length of the band, countable probabilities can arise, and positions can be determined. So to answer the second question I proposed— ‘What does collapse do to the information of this universe?’— it takes part of the whole information and knowledge of this universe, thus removing any notion of truth being absolute, and gives you localized, partial truths. We will later discuss the consequences of this, and particularly what a *human truth* is.”

“It feels relieving to mention a human after all this abstract talk.”

“Well, unfortunately we are not quite at the emotional side of the Great Contradiction, though I’d love to skip there, as it is the most beautiful side of it. First, we must discuss how consciousness relates to this, continuing with our theme of analyzing how physics applies to the Great Contradiction.

“My favorite thought experiment in all of physics is **Schrodinger’s Cat**— a true classic, in my collapsed view, at least. Imagine you put a cat in a sealed box, with air holes where it can breathe. Inside that box is a contraption that can poison and kill the cat if a quantum event, like the decay of a radioactive atom, happens and pulls a trigger on the contraption. Before opening the box, would you say the cat is dead or alive?”

“I wouldn’t be able to know, since the box is sealed and I can’t see the cat inside.”

“Precisely! So what *absolutely* true conclusions can you make?”

“That the cat is either dead or alive.”

“And when you observe it by opening the box, one of those conclusions becomes true in your perspective.”

“Sorry— I’m again confused how this relates to what we were just talking about.”

“Now take what we said about the wave function and instead think of it like a Boolean fact (true or false), and no longer a lengthy spatial dimension with many possible values, but now only two. In the contradictory state, it is both at once— the cat is technically both dead and alive. But after collapse, the cat must be one or the other. Of course, based on your knowledge of the probability of radioactive decay, there might be a higher chance that the cat is alive than dead, and so you can assign that state a higher probability of being the one the cat collapses into. But you can’t say for certain which state it will be, as even though one might have an extremely small probability, it can still be an edge case. The takeaway of this thought experiment is that observation causes collapse. *It is you opening the box that destroys the truth.*

“This fact follows for the five senses: without an observer to hear a tree fall in the woods, or see the aftermath of it tipped over, did the tree really ever fall? It’s irrelevant if it did or didn’t, because the lack of observation means it provides no information or truth to any conscious observer. It is easiest

for us to think of it as both fallen over and still standing up straight. In physics, this is called **superposition**, where we have an object in two contradictory, or competing, states at once. Complete superposition happens when all possible states of an object are existing together. For a Boolean fact, this is both true and false. For a spatial position, this is every possible position within the dimension. If you are familiar with statistics, think of complete superposition as including all elements of a **set**, and observation only showing you one of them. Another great example of this for a finite set is rolling a die: before it is rolled, it is in a superposition of all six sides. After it is rolled, it has collapsed to one of the six possible ones. The collapse is based on an equal probability of 1/6 for each side.”

“So existence is defined by observation.”

“Yes, hence why the reality we see is only part of the whole reality. Consciousness is the function that collapses information. It is the creator of it all. As vague as that sounds, I have nothing more to say on this except that there are levels to consciousness.

“To see what these levels are, let us revisit the term *black box*.”

“Could you redefine it for me? I forgot what it meant.”

“It is a system where you give it an input, and it produces an output, but you don’t know what function was applied to the input. You can attempt to decipher black boxes, but usually the pattern between inputs and outputs is too convoluted to decipher.”

“I see. Thanks.”

“Think of the universe as a systematic black box, upon which we can make actions within (input), and we are left to see how those actions affect what we see (output). When I embarked on my mission to follow in Socrates’ footsteps and repeatedly ask ‘Why?’, my goal was to decipher the pattern of this universe, or in other words, how *the biggest machine* worked. That way, anything I did, I could predict the effect of— ultimately, I would be safe, far away from uncertainty, and always knowing there would be pillows under my falls. And... well, that’s all I wanted. I just wanted to be in the arms of a mother.

“As you know, I realized that this absolute black box I sought was infinite in complexity after discovering the Great Contradiction. Infinite questions could lead to infinite answers. Neither the inputs or the outputs could be measured. The partially true physical world, which my senses collapsed the infinitely complex, absolutely true, black box of the universe to, was all I could view. At best, I was limited to subjectiveness— I was limited to opinion. And so, my actions put into my personal black box meant nothing, since in each moment I observed this world, the system I was trying to understand was rapidly changing its own function. An **infinitesimal**— or in other words, infinitely small— change in time or space bred for me a test run on a completely different machine.

“I found a beautiful fact about localized truth during this time in which my actions became *intangible*: we lived in **abstractions**. Do you know how complexity hierarchies work, or how computer scientists understand computer systems, the greatest example of finite systems?”

“A computer is like a black box to me.”

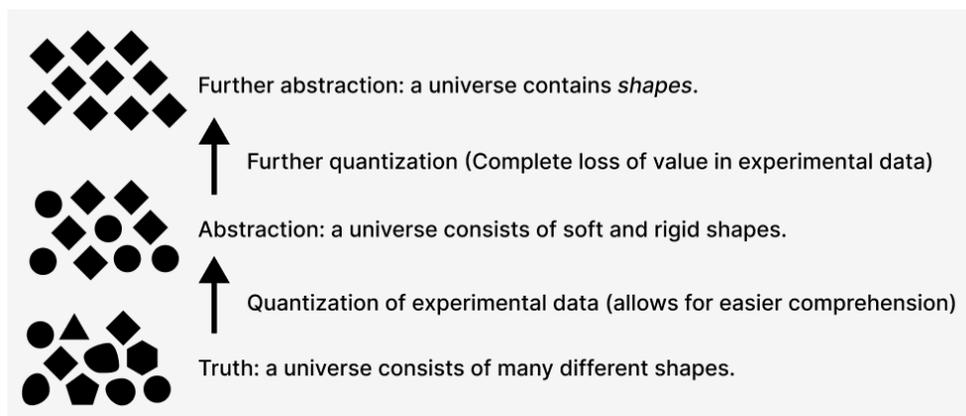
“Well, that is because it is. But do you at least *believe* that they are understandable?”

“Of course. Humans made them, so during at least some point of time, humans had a complete understanding of them.”

“In part that is true. While computers are complex, they are not infinitely complex, like the absolute universe. The more powerful a computer is, the more complex it is. Since computers are so powerful nowadays, it is hard for anyone to keep every single inner working of them in the forefront of their brain at the same time, so they use ‘abstractions.’ **Abstraction** is the process of generalizing information. You know how sometimes a subject is complex, so you explain it simply to someone, but then it loses some of its meaning?”

“It happens a lot of the time.”

“While doing that, you are abstracting information. Understanding the complex system of a computer works the same way for computer scientists: an extremely high level of abstraction, or a very simple way to understand a computer, is considering that the computer is made of a CPU, a memory unit, and a power supply. A lower abstraction, or a more complex and information-heavy way to understand a computer, is to consider an overview of the binary logic and what might be inside the CPU. An even lower abstraction could be knowing the exact connections between each transistor in the computer. You might often hear ‘low-level’ and ‘high-level’ programming. These are the same terms as I used before: low-level programming is machine code, assembly, or C and C++, where you need greater knowledge to use them, but are allowed greater accuracy and more control over the computer system. High-level programming consists of Python, JavaScript, or other languages that cluster functions into fewer terms and groups, but don’t give you that precise control over each component of the computer.



An example of the abstraction process.

“Since I believe abstractions are crucial to understanding the nature of truth, I will give one more example: let’s say our universe contains many different shapes— some made of straight edges and some asymmetrical blobs. Visualize this for me.”

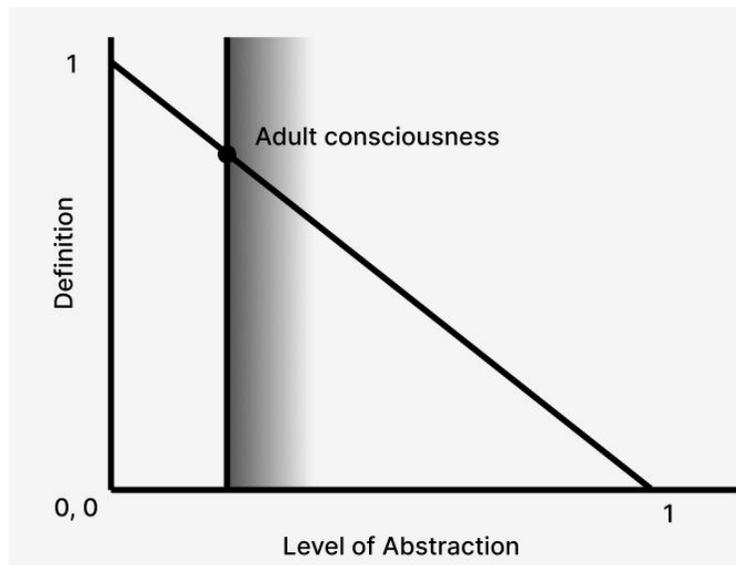
“I am seeing a bunch of shapes floating around each other.”

“To describe that set of shapes in perfect detail you must include many definitions: perhaps pentagons, squares, triangles, blobs, globs, convex blobs and globs, and so forth... Now make an abstraction of this: the set contains soft and rigid shapes. After this new definition, there is only one bit (two possible shapes) of information, compared to the multiple bits needed to represent more than two possible shapes. Considering that the same number of shapes exists in the set, what do you now visualize?”

“I see the same group of shapes, but the globs and blobs are now all circles, and the pentagons, squares, and triangles are all squares. Now I can only describe each as rather a circle or a square.”

“Perfect. Now make a further abstraction: the set contains shapes. This is less than one bit of information, and thus tells us nothing at all. Notice how, as the abstraction becomes higher-level, your description is quicker, but the scene given to your listener is less detailed.”

“So how does this relate to the great contradiction?”



Consciousness’ vague relation to the abstraction process.

“Imagine awareness is the ability to abstract a scene. To exist, to observe, to be cognizant— all used in similar meaning— is the act of making abstractions. Without awareness, the universe assumes ultimate, infinite complexity. It is in the superposition with all possibilities present. By being aware and observing with the five senses, the possibilities collapse, and you move to a higher abstraction. The complexity becomes finite and so the universe becomes an understandable and *defined* system. Hence,

abstraction is the act of living. One cannot live in the infinite universe— they must be lied to, either by their **fundamental consciousness** or further lied to by a lack of awareness, some plentiful ignorance, or simple stupidity.

“The former of those two options is like a hard barrier against the absolute truth. Fundamental consciousness cannot be surpassed, but intelligence levels and ability to think abstractly can change, as seen in how we have been able to travel out here, though we were once engaged with immaturity during childhood. We see the fundamental barrier in how our ability to observe spatial phenomena collapse into non-contradictory states breaks at what is called the **Planck length** (on the order of magnitude 10^{-35} meters, much smaller than the radius of a proton). Though we should not worry about coming across this fundamental barrier in the physical world, as we can’t even get close to seeing that scale with a microscope, let alone our feeble human eyes.

“So what is the limit of what our observation collapses? The easiest things to imagine having a superimposed set of states are things like shape, position, color, smell, roughness, and so on... physical attributes of objects. But some physicists, especially in the 21st century, propose that observation collapses much more than that: they believe that the physical laws, such as how many spatial dimensions we exist in, or the strength of gravity, are also results of collapsing a ‘ruliad’ of possible physical universes.

“I admit, there are still many questions I don’t know the answer to— which should be obvious to you, as I am still finite, alive, and not completely torn apart by the Great Contradiction. Of these questions, one that makes me thirsty for more knowledge is: what causes the collapse? It is easy to say that consciousness collapses the infinite to the finite, but it is hard to say what machine governs that process. Some have postulates, such as **Stenger’s anthropic dimensionality argument**, where he claims that three spatial dimensions exist because any more or less spatial dimensions would create unstable universes, ones where life could not develop fully enough to be conscious and observe anything at all.

“A similar unknown that I grapple with is: how do our collapsed observations feel continuous, as in how do I wake up in the same bed each morning? Clearly, there must be something going on during that time we are not aware of, some memory elsewhere. I will not even attempt a hypothesis on these matters, but it is important to propose these questions, since others might travel further towards understanding than I did in the future.”

“As if we didn’t have enough questions, physicists have begun to question physics itself...”

“That’s simply what great physicists do. Godspeed to them.

“Let us diverge from physics momentarily to relate this to a more humane concept: imagine those who try to save everybody in the entire universe. Imagine compassion extended across lifetimes... does that seem possible to you?”

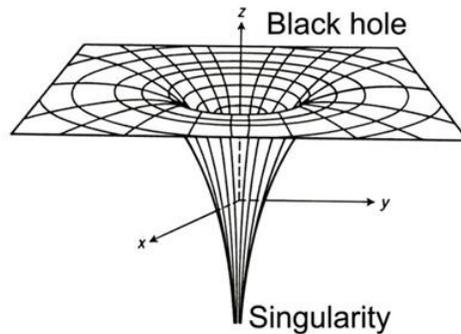
“This sounds evil. Are you proposing that you have to be somewhat selfish to live? That you can’t consider all the possibilities because it makes it too hard to act, like a sort of decision paralysis?”

“While you are right— I am proposing that— your view that this is an evil act is just the dark side of the coin. Think about it: if everyone tried to help everyone, and so they were all stuck in that paralysis of planning their help, would anything ever happen? For actionable life to occur, somebody must forget something, somebody must be ignorant of a faraway field where a farmer and his family are dying.”

“This sounds evil.”

Gideon paused and huffed, frustrated with himself.

“I know you have good intentions but it just doesn’t sound right,” you sneer at Gideon.



2D space curvature near a black hole and its singularity.

“That is an early consequence of diving into the well that is the singularity. Of course it will sound evil. At the time, I felt a deep sense of nihilism and hatred for this world when conceiving scenarios like this. I was in that pit of despair I mentioned earlier, falling into that infinite well, becoming closer to the Great Contradiction. Have you ever seen that two-dimensional representation of a space around a black hole, the gravitational well caused by **general relativity**?”

“I believe so.”

“If not, look at it again. That dip in spacetime is the one we are falling into. The lines on the ground around us, those that grow denser as the slope dips over the horizon, are the same lines that are on the graph. But I assure you, we are falling as quickly as we are climbing. Can you trust me and let me continue?”

“I feel like I must.”

“Good. Let me try to lighten the mood by examining another related realm of physics: **cosmology**. I believe that we humans aren’t too different from a bunch of stars in the sky. If we look at any specific thing long enough, really, we can understand all there is about any other thing, as vague as

that sounds. And so, I choose the stars to be that one thing I look at— *they will speak to me the universe.*

“Let me begin by rephrasing the ethical dilemma of being aware as a loss of detail in the truth: imagine that you are looking up at the stars.”

Gideon tilted his head to see the edge of Cassiopeia drifting up from the fleeting twilight. The glow around the forthcoming stars was dithered into faint pixels, the stars themselves like infinitesimal point masses.

“How quaint the night is when there are only so many stars out,” he continued, “Sometimes we believe there are too few, and so we travel to the desert in search of a fuller sky— sometimes we travel out here, away from the city, *even away from nature.* But let me propose what might lie further than this: a desert so bare of civilization that more stars than anyone, even us, has ever seen illuminate the sky. Swashes of green protrude with a saturation so deep that it looks like candy floating above you. Now let me go even further: increase the speed of light, that limiting factor that makes the observable universe only so big, that fundamental rule imposed by consciousness, and let stars from the very depths of this infinite universe be seen by you. The sky becomes brighter as you go deeper into these ethereal deserts, and ultimately, on the edge of seeing it all, the sky is so bright, with every combination of star and galaxy in every corner and position possible, that you can no longer see in the first place.

“Just as you couldn’t see anything in the black sky, you can’t see anything in the white sky. You are blinded. You have lost your ability to observe.

“This is no different than how I treated compassion in that previous example.”

“*But this example no longer makes me feel as if I’m leaving people behind. I am instead happy that I can’t see some stars, because then at least I can see and not be blinded.*”

“That is good. Being aware of everything loops around to being aware of nothing. What matters is *change* in your vision. You need a relative difference in shape and contrast in color. All black and all white both convey no information. You can’t take what you see and assign a bit value, for there is no reference for a null bit.

“Borges’ **‘The Library of Babel’** does an excellent job of exemplifying this— and I will come back to this story later, for it will be pertinent then. In the story, a library consists of all possible books to be written. What might seem like vast knowledge to a naive eye is actually no knowledge at all, for due to overpopulation, the value of text becomes depreciated, and the total information stored in all the books is effectively zero. I would read the short story if you have not already, for it will explain this consequence of infinity (and in turn, also a consequence of contradiction) better than I have here.

“Back to the stars— those unfamiliar friends are on another scale than us. By taking some of them into the palms of our hands, we discover a greater universality. Such is why when my young self’s questions grew in magnitude to intrude cosmology, I found greater proof of the Fundamental Contradiction. This proof culminated with the ambiguous— and hotly-debated— **Big Bang Theory.**

Ignoring the process that occurs after the Big Bang, and simply assuming that it proposes the universe starts in a singularity, we can ask many questions, but most notably: was the Big Bang caused by an observer?”

“I can’t be sure,” I replied.

“I can’t be sure either, but it is a good question to ponder. All I know is that these edge cases that touch singularities, paradoxes, and contradictions are littered everywhere in the field of astronomy, and really anywhere where you are in the depths of remote, unexplored places. Similarly to viewing the humongous, viewing the tiny also creates a similar number of edge cases. For this reason, as a profuse skeptic, I have continuously been going away from human scale, and rather into the microns or the parsecs.

“Going back to Taoist philosophy: there is a **duality** among many physical principles. Cosmology and quantum mechanics are on opposite ends of the scale spectrum, but each deduce principles relating to the contradiction— for example, the wave-particle duality, where we can describe many phenomena of our reality by particles, and an eerily similar number of phenomena by waves. This is because the large wraps around to the small in an infinite dimension, justified by how earlier we wrapped negative infinity around to positive infinity, in that band or bracelet structure. Think of the word infinitesimal. Two things that are infinitesimally far apart are also infinitely far apart. Measurement, in the infinite dimension, is impossible. And in what realm is dimension possible?”

“The realm of the Great Contradiction, the one observers are cut off from.”

“Precisely! And again, we have found another contradiction: *things are as small as they are big.*

“Only when we engage in **discrete** mathematics does this troubling phenomenon disappear. Discrete, being the same meaning as finite, is created by the act of quantization. Do you remember how **Planck** described energy packets as quantized?”

“Not really. That sounds unfamiliar.”

“It might be worth a lesson, but for now, it is not too important. All you must know is that abstraction takes the infinite separation between points and gives it a fixed distance. The mutual change in the dimension that occurs with this is that fewer points are available to be chosen. Instead of points being infinitesimally apart on a **continuous** dimension, they now have a unit length between points. As you abstract further, you characterize the dimension with fewer potential points, which are further apart when there are fewer of them. It is the sudden ‘snap’ from discrete to continuous dimensions that gives the contradiction its character— that edge case, found by taking mathematical **limits** to infinity.”

“I’m getting a bit lost.”

“That’s okay. You don’t finish a book halfway through. If you ever find math intimidating when trying to understand the Great Contradiction, you should fall back and rely on logical axioms when deducing its *consequences*. All of this is about working with systems, and deducing the difference

between contained, finite systems, like computers— which are composed purely of logical operations— and infinite, uncontained systems like this universe. Again, it is the space within that sudden *snap*, from continuous dimensions to discrete dimensions, that scientists and mathematicians must investigate.

“The furthest logic has gotten to acknowledging the contradiction is **Godel’s** work, where he coined the **incompleteness theorems**. The summary of the incompleteness theorems is that the logic that we base math on is ultimately incomplete, or unprovable by those who use it. In other words, logic cannot prove its own consistency. It is barred from understanding itself. Do not get me mistaken— this does not prove mathematics is a sham. In fact, it is nowhere near, since mathematics still obeys **Popper’s criterion of falsifiability**, which says that the rules we should abide by are those which are hardest to prove false, not those which are demanded to be true. Where does this feel familiar? Ah! The dismissal of edge cases, and how the doctors prioritized the diseases that affected the most people— they were the most dangerous, and therefore were viewed as the most *true*.”

“This is still quite complex for me. I’m not very good at logic, I fear.”

“That’s alright,” Gideon yawned, “The rest of the scientific jargon behind my journey can be incorporated on a rolling basis. There is one last specific mention of previously studied science that I would like to leave you with, and I want to introduce it with a question.”

Gideon grabbed an abstract mug that floated above him, made up of only a few vertices, but with enough faces to be concave and hold a simulation of hot cocoa swishing around. He sipped it and licked his lips, sighing with his eyes fluttering.

He asked, “Do you think we can understand why hot cocoa tastes so good?”

“I hope we can.”

“That’s good— your belief in understanding is what keeps you alive, and no matter where you go, you must hold onto that fundamental *belief*. But this problem, of understanding why certain things taste as they do, or feel as they do, is defined as the **hard problem of consciousness**, because, well... it has stumped our greatest physicists and neuroscientists for ages. Understanding **qualia**, or in other words, the subjective experiences of someone who is aware, might be ultimately unsolvable. The logical, finite system we see might in fact obey the incompleteness theorems proposed by Godel. Like the barrier of fundamental consciousness I talked about earlier, there could be something beyond that we have no hope of understanding. And yet, so many of us search for it anyway. Isn’t that a thought to make you tired?”

You nod in response. Gideon seems to melt down the side of the cube he rests on, slumping his chin over his shoulder.

Interlude II

Again, you are unable to sleep. The only difference you feel is an even stronger restlessness, though at the same time an even stronger debilitation. Your body is too afraid to move closer to the steep section of the ground, for you fear you will *fall*. So instead of moving, you find solace in staring at the stars.

They really are magnificent, you think to yourself, *to be that far away and still visible, for the information to reach us down here.*

You imagine what is farther, inspired by Gideon's examples of an infinite space filled with infinite stars— these are the *visions of infinity*. You imagine what is beyond all stars, and how many times humans reappear as aliens. With the most vivid detail, you imagine a far future in which we have gathered the technology to travel to distant galaxies. You are one of the astronauts, millions of light-years away, and you come across a star just like the Sun, with a planet just like Earth, with an alien species just like humans— in fact, so much like humans that they don't turn their heads one bit as you land on their planet. You merge into their society and continue on as one of them. Only in your eyes are you an alien. Only because of your memory of a past life, on a different segment— a different collapsed set— of the universe.

Then you imagine it the other way around, and there it works as well— an alien indistinguishable on Earth.

Who are we? you think to yourself.

We are aliens, in a world that we are just travelling to. Life is a *vacation*, life is *but a dream*.

As your imaginings gather detail, the sky starts to bulge, just as Gideon had talked of in his cosmological thought experiment of an infinite universe. Stars appear at every angle, and as the blackness of night turns to white, the amount of information seeping into your eyes doesn't change one bit. In a full world, there is just as little information as in an empty world.

You are blinded by the immense brightness so much that you squeeze your eyes closed, but the light still leaks through your eyelids like a trickling tap. Somehow, by being so awake, you have forced yourself into a strange, stressful sleep, one full of tension.

Chapter III: The Consequences

Gideon had trouble sleeping last night as well. His immunity to the horrors of infinity appears to be cracking. His eyes are blank, carrying nothing but the reflections of what falls beneath the horizon in front of him. Mindlessly, he continues to sip his hot cocoa and talks to you like you are a wall.

“I remember the exact year *everything* started to solidify. I had become overwhelmed by the Great Contradiction's relation to rigorous mathematics and logic, and so, I fled. Love had evaded me

throughout my journey since then— or perhaps I had evaded love— and that tired me sought some of that basic human pleasure. I wanted to swim in the hot springs while it rained; I wanted to ride the open road through the fields on a motorcycle. I wanted to climb the highest mountains and feel accomplished; I wanted to drift mindlessly about the ocean in a raft. So much of that I had missed because of the hours and days I spent thinking alone, wandering here in his metaphysical realm, where definitions elude you as much as women. It was time for me to get a taste of life away from contradiction, away from the true state of this universe.

“Though when I tried to live— tried to travel back to the treeline— I realized that I had only yet experienced a small portion of the Great Contradiction’s *consequences*. The philosophy was not done berating me. Of course there was its impact on mathematics and scientific reasoning, as stated yesterday, but much of its impact actually focused on emotion, the body, and humans in general. They were vague, uncharacterizable effects— the effects that scare me the most, for they can not be neatly placed in drawers.

“The first of these terrible consequences was the onslaught of an inability to define *anything* in words. When people would say they loved something, I would ask ‘Why?’ and realize that their love had no basis, no fundamental reason other than that they loved one side of the coin, and ignored the other. The justification for everything became arbitrary and false. The best example of this was through the many opinions people had on the problem of the ‘cup half full or half empty.’ What do you think the cup is? Is it half full or half empty in your view?”

“I’d like to hope that it is half full. I’m an optimist.”

“Your intentions are good, but you are wrong. The answer to this problem is so simple that it is funny: it is obvious that the cup is both half full and half empty at once. The states are just descriptions of what is there. But you see! We can’t say each statement at the same time. It is just like the Yin-Yang and choosing black or white— *we are creatures of time*. When those around me argued over this, I fell silent. To me, the coin obviously could just be flipped. To me, the description of this was irrelevant: *this universe simply was*.

“Conversations became difficult to join and sustain. If I did manage to make my way into a circle of friends, I’d soon turn quiet when infinitely questioning if the statements I prepared to say actually held any relevant information. And before I knew it, the conversations I had joined ended, and those friends fled. Any possibility of me being able to express the truth in relation to this physical world was impossible, and the world started to seem *intangible*, as you put it earlier. The frailty of our lives was exposed, and I couldn’t find a reason to be fervently passionate about anything, because ultimately, no statement or opinion could be completely, inseparably justified. In my view, the people around me were just a bunch of ignorant, egotistical souls who thought they knew something, but really knew nothing at all. Their statements ignored the edge cases, and arguments could go on forever if they were close to the truth.

“An argument which always had my ear was whether altruism was inherently selfish. I would hear a ton of people state their truths on this, and all the while, I could only think of one thing: it was neither. Those three words rang around my head, split it open, and made me sink further towards infinity. Altruism was neither unselfish nor selfish— all that existed was both altruism and selfishness, simply at the same time. They meant the same thing.

“I did this same thing for the magnificent free will or determinism debate. I said that they, too, were the same thing.

“When I would tell people my views that aligned with the Great Contradiction, *where opposites were truly the same*, those around me sneered and looked at me with disgust.”

“Why is that?”

“Because I was putting myself on a pedestal above everyone. By viewing myself as the only one who assumed nothing, and that everyone else was prideful in their unstable opinions, I had somehow become the most egotistical. Isn't that funny, how being humble results in being the most egotistical? Another contradiction, perhaps... in fact, it could only make sense through a contradictory view of this world. It was the only way. It was **The Way**.

“What an egotistical fool!” they would think to themselves, and they were right. My pedestal was there only because I refused to collapse and have a single opinion. I took two conflicting things and tried to claim they were both true. I tried to stay in superposition. I tried to be invincible, but by doing so, I never had anything to be invincible against, for I slowly stopped saying things, since saying things started to appear useless, and sometimes, dangerous. A partial truth could kill, as the edge case could become ignored. An ignored case could make people immeasurably lonely. I could not bear to have sacrifices, for watching my brother be an edge case during childhood hurt too much. I was cursed to leave nobody behind, in a universe that granted success to those who did. It was that anger that spawned a great envy for those who were bold enough to have wild, wild opinions— for those who claimed they had something that was both defined and true. I wanted to be like them, but I couldn't. The jealousy was so great that it turned to hatred— ‘Die with me! Die with me and stay silent with me!’ I screamed in my head, ‘Say nothing because nothing is true!’

“I screamed the most at Western religion, particularly the denominations that followed the Bible. It was clear to me that they were only popular because they provided an out-of-the-box fundamental truth and claimed ‘full stop,’ which allowed their followers to rest easy and not have a chance of coming across the great contradiction. Hence, in my view, these religions were built on finding comfort through lies.

“The easiest example of this view can be seen through Christianity. They claim that God exists, and he is eternal, and the only. The verse goes: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.” (Deuteronomy 6:4). A large moral of Christianity is cautioning against being prideful and egotistic,

sins that seem ever inevitable in today's world. This popular verse is meant to exemplify the humility that Christianity should foster: "love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31).

"An issue arises from this level of belief, since after my studies, I concluded that a belief, in anything whatsoever, is prideful. The second a Christian believes they know God is real is the very second they have become prideful. They think those who don't believe that God is real are living in a world of lies, and they have elevated themselves on a pedestal, yet somehow convinced themselves that they are humble.

"And along with this, they left out edge cases that modern society had shown to be too important to be ignored. Think of the limits and hatred the bible caused for queer and transgender individuals... how could anybody be okay with sacrificing that many to the slaughter just so a handful of others could live? It was outrageous! Their partial truths were too partial, I thought to myself, and yet the true Christians always appeared to be happy. It was through their ignorance of certain parts of their world— their confidence to define and only look at half of the Yin-Yang— that they found joy.

"With that realization, I discovered the reason why religion is so powerful: the baseline abstraction of an intelligent human— or a human who has room for a lot of computation and complexity— is usually too low to quell the horrors of an infinite universe. Humans need to be dumber; they need to be less compassionate, to forget the horrors of some parts of this world, otherwise not one person in all of history would have ever, *ever*, had a good time, *or any time at all*. Religion is that simplification— it is the high-level abstraction that makes the system of the world understandable for our puny brains. It removes the splitting headaches and makes the world seem solvable by just praying and having the thought that God is real.

"A more ancient variant of religion's power is seen in how past civilizations used to believe that gods controlled the weather. This was a reasonable conclusion for someone who did not understand meteorology, as the weather, even for mathematicians today, is so complex that our approximations of its behavior are often so wrong that we commonly wear shorts on a rainy day. Without our new technology, imagine trying to predict what would have happened with the clouds?"

"It would have been impossible. It would have been unbelievably scary."

"And so, those in the past destroyed the multi-dimensionality of the weather, simplifying it to a higher-level abstraction, where simple, low-information tasks like sacrifices and gifts could be quantized inputs to the weather system, not petabytes of unintelligible numerical data gathered on every inch of the planet. But look at what happened back then: due to the simplicity of their abstraction, the output of the weather system did not often match the input of their prayers, leaving them stranded with broken, ancient technology. But those days when the weather betrayed them were considered mere edge cases. For their lives to function, they had to ignore them.

"Naturally, Christianity and ancient practices ignore edge cases. Forgetting and letting the edge cases slide is the practice— the sacrifice— that gives us life. It hurts, because if you are unlucky, you are

left behind in peril. But life is a game of optimization for humans, not one of perfection. I personally believe that Christianity is too far away from the human optimum. I think it should look at itself and change.

“During my time realizing these consequences, though, I was not focused on optimums— I still wanted the exact truth and nothing less. While those around me sought optimized outcomes for their internal, *human truths*— truths that were based on their local slice of the infinite dimensionality of life— I was left scrambling trying to find that absolute truth, infinitely far away. Yet I couldn’t latch onto anything.

“Perfectionism was death. Perfectionism was to account for every possible case, to be in superposition. But as conscious creatures, we couldn’t express superposition. We had to collapse, and inevitably, I knew that we had to sacrifice perfectionism, but I couldn’t accept it.

“When I was asked for my opinion, it often came through the need for advice. Those around me thought I was wise, after all my time spent thinking alone, all my time travelling to alien lands. But the issue was that I had nothing to tell them. Advice was impossible for me to give, because I held imaginings of those receiving it, taking it to heart, and getting unlucky: arriving at the edge case upon which the advice neglected. It was too dangerous to give instructions or to critique things. Once a writer asked me for advice on how to tell her story. I sat there by her side and pondered for a long time, ultimately seeing that her story would end up being both great and horrible no matter what I told her.

“The only advice I could give at the end of the day was for her to finish it. To write something into existence and make it feel as real as possible. After that day, I figured out why everyone loved stories so much: they betrayed infinity. They created tangible features that we could latch onto and find comfort in. They weren’t like us, where you are constantly shifting from person to person, where I am sometimes a man and sometimes a woman, where the shapes floating around us change color with every blink. Stories have consistency, and that rejection of infinity makes us happy. Stories are no different than subscribing to religion. They are just another form of belief, but on a very fundamental level.

“I mean... who likes a book in which there is no ending? If there is a cliffhanger, we only become satisfied if we complete the story in our mind, or if there is a sequel. We love endings as much as we love beginnings. We love taking the infinite, recursive, paradoxical, cyclic state of the universe and splicing it! We love seeing things go places and not just loop back around on ourselves! We love change! But I... I could not take this seriously outside of fiction.

“Still, in every storefront, in every headline, in every motivational speech, I saw a deviation from the truth. My obsession with the absolute made me despise one thing the most: aphorisms. Every aphorism that was said to hold wisdom only held wisdom for humans. They were optimized truths— truths that held up most of the time, but would die on faraway planets with strange aliens. I do not

know why I was so attached to those distant conscious observers that I could not see. It just felt... rude to let them be lied to while we basked in truth.

“And so, I couldn’t grab the truth and strangle it even if I wanted to. I was stuck in the middle of everything on one side, and nothing on the other. Each concept tugged at me equally and kept me inert. I was being told two conflicting truths at once and said to make sense of them both. I was trying to walk forward and backward with one set of legs. I was *so* entangled in contradiction that I felt like I was dying, slipping away from life.

“And the worst part was that there wasn’t an end in sight. Every last bit of my existence was characterized by infinity.”

“It sounds like mental jail.”

“You are right. I was in a prison. More specifically, a prison which **Albert Camus** outlined early in his book ‘**The Fall**,’ called the **Little Ease**. Beneath the White Tower in the Tower of London was a small hole where prisoners did not have enough vertical room to stand tall, but also didn’t have enough horizontal room to sit down. It was a cell of discomfort, where nobody could settle in any position. Does that dilemma sound familiar? The prisoner was stuck in an inescapable position, where he could not have ego or humility.

“‘The Fall’ outlines many of the contradiction’s dilemmas beautifully. Do you remember the metaphysical question I proposed a few days ago: ‘Why is there something rather than nothing?’ Camus has a strange answer: something *must* happen. Can you imagine a world in which nothing is happening?”

“No, for observation requires things to happen.”

“Precisely! Camus blamed most human affairs on that simple fact: something *must* happen. And what is mesmerizing is how modern physics agrees with this. Imagine a theoretical pencil that stands on its tip. Could it stay there forever?”

“I think if no force touches it, it should be able to, right?”

“Wrong! In quantum mechanics, the theoretical pencil must always fall over. For something to have zero uncertainty in its momentum *and* zero uncertainty in its tip position is impossible. Randomness comes into play at that devilish Planck length and knocks the pencil down. Nothing can stand forever. *Something must happen.*

“But I didn’t want anything to happen— I was too in tune with other sufferers, and so I felt like I had to suffer with them myself. I knew that this path would lead me down a dangerous hole— to the singularity— so I resumed my search for something true. Though this time, I did not seek it through Taoism or science, but through Buddhism. In the Western world, there was no better promise for paradisaal peace than leaving the rat race behind to meditate in the mountains of Nepal.

“On my way to the East, I thought a lot. My mind understood the Great Contradiction, but my heart had not accepted it just yet. In fact, I was unsure if it ever could, which is why I abruptly

didn't turn back to the West at that moment. I was desperate to find some truth, some enlightenment, that wasn't contradictory in nature— enlightenment that allowed me to know something, to be prideful and actually have a solid pedestal to stand on, *not one that was only tall when viewed from an arbitrary angle.*

“I was a fool, though, a hopeless addict. I thought my suffering had peaked and that Buddhism and its promise of enlightenment would save me. But as I began my practice, I realized that they had been chasing the same truth I had, with the only difference being the way they were chasing it. Through meditation, they attempted to see the world as clearly as possible. Through quietness, they attempted to hear the world as loudly as possible. Through selflessness and compassion, they attempted to give the world as much as possible. All of this was to attain enlightenment, or what you referred to as utopia or paradise when I first found you out here. But by trying to attain enlightenment, they sacrificed themselves. They were giving in to the contradiction in an indirect way, trying their best to reach infinity. But as long as they were alive, they would never reach enlightenment, for the fundamental barrier of consciousness made them disregard the absolute truth, and so, they could only get close to enlightenment.

“This made me immeasurably disappointed— to travel halfway across the world, to a different set of mountains and trees, just to find nothing new... I felt an even greater suffering coming towards me.”

“How so?”

“I admittedly didn't indulge in the practice of Buddhism as much as I could have, but in some aspects, it only confirmed the Great Contradiction further, turning me off from the thought of it helping. And to me, that was peril.”

“Other than that enlightenment was infinitely far away, what aspects of it served to confirm the Great Contradiction?”

“Most notably, the concept of ‘non-self.’”

“What is that?”

“Non-self is the fact that we must entirely reject the concept of a ‘self.’”

“I know that. It was pretty easy to gather from the name. What I don't get is why we must reject the ‘self.’”

“Let me ask you this: whom do you define as yourself?”

“I am a male who is tall, has ginger hair, hazel eyes, of average weight and not particularly strong. I'm relatively good at cricket. I spend most of my time doing journalism and learning about unique people. I'm good at writing, decent at storytelling. I'm pretty horrible at singing, but I love to do it. I-”

“It’s nothing personal, but you can stop there— I understand. Now, which of those attributes that you have assigned to yourself are fundamental? By fundamental, I mean which of those cannot change? Which will be part of you forever?”

“I would say that most of them will be with me forever, aside from doing journalism— I think I will retire and then stop doing my job eventually.”

“What about being good at cricket? Do you not think you will get old and then your skills will diminish compared to the young?”

“I suppose it could.”

“What if a cruel universe exists where you have a calamity that causes your memory to become scrambled. Do you think you will remember how to write and tell a story?”

“It’s possible but unlikely.”

“Aha! But it’s possible! It’s an edge case!”

“Then I suppose you’re right. But even after that I still have my physical attributes. I am still a male who is tall, has ginger hair, hazel eyes, and is average weight and not particularly strong.”

“But you can gain weight.”

“Okay, then I’m a male who is tall, has ginger hair, and hazel eyes.”

“You can become taller. You can lose your ginger hair.”

“Then I have hazel eyes. If that’s all I am, then it’s that I have hazel eyes!”

“Technology grows swiftly. Who said we won’t have eye transplants in the future?”

“But-”

“There are no buts! Your sense of self, even those attached to your body and not based on the clothes you wear, are a preconception of your awareness. In absolute reality, in tune with the contradiction, there is no such thing as the self. All attributes can be lost in less than a second, all promise can be falsified like a leaf blowing in the wind.”

“So who am I then? Who are you?”

“This is where I found plenty of trouble waiting for me while studying Buddhist culture. The West had convinced me that identity was an issue that could be solved, while in the East I learnt that it wasn’t a thing in the first place. The vain fashion lifestyle that intruded on my previous life in America was sickening to look back on. There was so much attachment to the self that I felt like I had been a fool any time I wasn’t in tune with the Great Contradiction. To think I was scared of losing something when it wasn’t even there in the first place!”

“Then answer the question: who am I and who are you! I see you in front of me! We must be here!”

“What are you defining?”

You are speechless in reaction to Gideon’s strange response, trying to muster words coagulated in cloudy thought.

“Anything you define in one moment can disappear the next,” Gideon bluntly stated, “You will never characterize me— you will never define anything in this fringe world, or let alone what ‘this fringe world’ is. This stems from the fact of *the moment*. The moment is not a measurable unit of time. It is the essence of fundamental life. It is the infinitesimal part of a continuous dimension. Humans are obsessed with trying to capture the moment, but you cannot capture the moment, since it is intangible. It is not like a frame being rendered on a computer’s executable. It is not something discrete, holding information. It holds as much information as it doesn’t. The Buddhists say that life is transient, meaning ‘forever changing.’ That is their way of talking about the inability to define life, the inability to capture it and hold it still.”

“I feel like we are quite far from the great contradiction. How does this relate back?”

“*Something must happen*. If you say life is always changing, then is it really always changing? Is it not constant, for ‘always changing’ implies it is always doing the same thing? Transientness, and ‘Forever changing,’ is misunderstood. For something to really be always changing, it must be cyclically standing still, then moving, then standing still, then moving... or doing both at once. What is always changing yet continuously staying still? We have mentioned it numerous times before.”

“A contradiction. It’s the only thing that can stand still and also be moving.”

“Precisely! If I may say, you seem a little bit down.”

You frown, still thinking about *nonsel*. You lift your hand and blink a few times. Even now, while you are awake, it changes shape and color in those slivers of lackluster unawareness.

“I’m fine,” you reply.

Gideon puts his hand behind his back and pulls it as if it were the tentacle of an octopus. He then repeats the motion and returns to his original hand.

“This was the heaviest effect of the Great Contradiction for me. The complete loss of self, caused by the infinitesimal nature of the fleeting moment, is the same as reaching the singularity. To quantize moments into periods of time is to define. To make eras is to characterize them. To say that someone was something requires a system to be finite. In infinity, we are reduced to infinitesimally small beings— irrelevant beings.

“I thought Buddhists claim that their lifestyle is ‘freeing?’”

“They do, and for many it is. But for me, the loss of identity sparked a numbness that was greater than ever before. In the humid forests, I found myself undefinable, again wandering away from the temples and onto these abstract planes. Those around me become mere parts of the world, mere collections of information. Stories lost their brilliance and magic. I lost the beautiful *sonder*, which I realized I took for granted. Though we can never prove it, it would be a miracle if you and others are truly real. Isn’t it funny how that assumption is just born with us?”

“That others exist?”

“Yes. Upon really learning about the world, it seems like we should have had the opposite initial assumption, that others are not real until we can feel their feelings and they can feel ours.”

You look at Gideon, squinting, trying to see who he really is. He is right— how can you prove he’s feeling the same emotions? Why did you assume he was? Your heart skips a beat, and seems to thump deeply in response.

“Perhaps it is because derealization is more dangerous to our own survival, and so, evolution made us believe that others are real,” Gideon shrugged, “It’s sort of nice to view cooperation as more beneficial than individualism. It’s inspiring in ways I can’t describe, and it’s something I don’t know for sure. All I know is that, while returning to these planes for the second time, derealization made me want to cripple over and die. It was the embodiment of the contradiction’s strongest effects, and an experience so daunting that it threatened an immediate derailment!

“It was then, in that inescapable pit of existence, akin to nihilism, and having been stowed away in the Little Ease for so long, that it clicked in my mind: being friends with the Great Contradiction was the same as being nearly dead. To be fully with the Great Contradiction, you had to be *utterly* dead. The Great Contradiction proves you wrong until nothing, not even yourself, can bear to exist.

“But I had a savior: while I could contemplate the Great Contradiction in my mind, I could not fully experience it physically, for I was still— and thankfully— only seeing *one* world in front of me. Think about it: what do you think you see when you’re dead?”

“I assume you would see nothing.”

“That’s a good guess, but that doesn’t make much sense. You’re still seeing something, which technically means you’d be alive.”

“That’s odd, but I understand.”

“When you are dead, or potentially also when you’re asleep, you are seeing both everything and nothing. You are in pure contradiction. You are not just beside the absolute truth, but you are part of and with it. *Death is black and white at once*. It is when you wake up that you become alive. That is the act of collapse. As long as I was fundamentally alive, I could only be, at best, friends with the Great Contradiction— not lovers.”

“That makes sense, because you said previously that absolute truth is impossible to attain.”

“I did, and like most of this conversation, I have just been saying the same thing with different words.

“So there I was in that state of pure nihilism, close to death, and letting the world pass me by. I had become nothing more than a silent observer, for I was *still* unwilling to accept that this life was nothing more than a lengthy, arduous dream. Let me tell you: the death of the silent observer is a horrifying one. Nobody shows up to your funeral, but at least you maintained your pride, I guess. Is that enough to justify the loneliness? It is not, because in those moments, as I thought my life was

ending, I realized that I didn't care one bit about being on a pedestal. I couldn't pick myself up just then, though. My heart needed time to rebuild itself, so I moped around for years on end, watching children laugh while exploring the forest, while I lay on this cold, hard ground, sleeping through eons of life springing and dying. Everything happened around me, as if I were sitting in the center of a carousel. And it was all because I was too attached to the nature of reality to accept that my bed had to be shaky and not solid.

"Do you remember the concept of superposition?"

"I do."

"Think of my inaction like this: the world demanded my hand to reach in every which direction, and with each moment it flickered between choices, so neither choice could activate the nerves in my arm to move it anywhere. This decision paralysis was death's friend. So I sat... and sat... and sat... doing nothing but thinking about which way to move my hand, and never actually moving it an inch.

"Over that period of lifeless slumber, I would watch technology advance at a pace that the world had never seen before, mostly due to the rise of artificial intelligence and a rapid increase in the computational ability of processors. For so long during my depression, I viewed the loss of self as something stemming from the infinitesimal changes in the world— a consequence of the small scale. But as machines started to create paintings nearly indistinguishable from humans, I realized that the loss of self could likewise be lost by overpopulation— the large scale.

"Let's do a thought experiment: how do you define two indistinguishable people as separate?"

"You name them differently?" you reply, confused, "I'm sorry— I'm not sure if I'm understanding correctly."

"Even if their names are unique, how would you know which to call the other? This is the twin dilemma."

"I think it's unlikely for this to ever happen in humans, though. Even human twins have some physical features that allow you to tell them apart."

"Exactly! In human twins, you say! I am talking about theoretical twins. Did the train in Einstein's infamous special relativity thought experiment stop it from applying to physics? Was the device in Schrodinger's box that killed the cat one we have invented? Thought experiments deal with edge cases. This is an edge case. It is possible, but unlikely. By examining edge cases, we find more fundamental truths."

"Okay, so say these exact replicas exist. I don't think there's a way to tell them apart, then."

"Precisely! The twins are indistinguishable, even in voice and how they act. Therefore, at any moment, they can switch identities. Now, how do you think edge cases happen? How are outliers made in statistical data?"

"By running the experiment repeatedly."

“Of course— you’ve done your studying. So as technology became more accessible, and the ability to paint great paintings was given to the layman, overpopulation of art began, for the ‘experiment’ of making a painting could be done with much greater efficiency, and by a greater number of individuals. And suddenly, within the span of a year, it felt like art had diminished in value so far that there was barely any reason to paint anymore. All the paintings had been made due to the ease of asking a machine to generate a plenitude of them for you. There was no reason to paint yourself other than simply enjoying the process.

“Let’s relate this to the self. Imagine a world with a larger population than Earth, where you can simply search through a database to see others who are similar to you. As you increase the population, you start to see the repetition of individuals become greater. Or at least, you see the repetition of *similar* individuals become greater. And we humans don’t bother ourselves much with the details, like the certain positions of a freckle or the size of a hand. Can you see how this might be troubling?”

“Nobody can be unique anymore.”

“Exactly— how would you ever stand out from the crowd? The issue can be solved in two ways: one, you choose to live in a small ‘set’ of people, or two, you decrease the accessibility to search the entire ‘set’ of people in the universe. Now imagine the population went to infinity. If all people can be a different combination of characteristics, then it is inevitable that the same person gets repeated an infinite number of times over. To finish this thought experiment, let’s imagine that you encounter your twin, whose name is based on the combination of characteristics he is given (therefore, his name is the same as yours). If your mother asks for you to help her with a chore, how would you know if she is calling you or your twin? The *self* is lost due to both the infinitesimal and the infinite, because the infinitesimal and the infinite are the same thing.

“Going back to the stars: if there are infinite stars in the sky, how might we tell them apart when looking at them with a telescope? Information becomes repeated, and if something occurs twice, we no longer have a unique set. The speed of light once again saves us by giving us a limited accessibility to the set. If it wasn’t for that, we’d be doomed. Another contradiction would happen: everything would become as common as it is rare.”

“Why do people want to be unique? Is it possible for the universe to be okay with being a non-unique set?”

“I will answer this question indirectly: the search for something to make you unique is actually the search for something to make you feel *real*. Our purpose in life is to feel as real as possible— to feel alive— but when the self is lost, we feel unreal— we lose ourselves to derealization and come here. By being unique, you are indispensable, *you are important*, you are needed. That feeling is what most humans strive for. Who wants to live in a world where you aren’t needed? It is that world in which you are cast out to eat lunch by yourself. It is a lonely world.

“I want to briefly go back to technology’s effect on society. As you saw, it has nearly ruined art, or at least shaken the community of artists. To begin, let me ask you a question to refresh your memory: how did we get to this abstract plane, away from the forest?”

“By searching for the truth.”

“What does technology seek to do?”

“It is a way to exemplify our mastery of the universe.”

“Precisely how I wanted you to answer that question! It is a demonstration that we know the truth. Technology is not always useful, though. At some point, technology passes the human truth optimum and speeds up towards an infinite complexity. It begins to hurt us, *kill us*. AI art is one of those areas in which technology is still a demonstration of the truth, but it is by no means a useful demonstration. Generally, the technology I saw rise while I slept out here was more dangerous to humans than it was helpful. It only pushed humans into corners. Even before AI could create art, we saw humans go to great lengths just to stand out: abstract and modern art were movements that traditionally required little mastery, but humans were drawn to them because they allowed them to be unique. Can you imagine how hard it must be to find something that makes you indispensable nowadays? Even abstract art doesn’t suffice. The artists of the future will have to paint things beyond the horizon, down where the slope is slipperier, and closer to the singularity...”

Gideon looked beyond and sighed. “I think that was when I found a reason to stand up again.”

“What was the reason?” you ask.

“Tomorrow I will tell you why. Don’t get too cold tonight.”

Interlude III

You can’t even tolerate staring at the sky anymore. You can barely lie down to sleep as well. You are restless. You feel like your campsite has incrementally shifted down the slope. Your back slides as you sleep.

You think to yourself, *Who is Gideon? Who is...*

He sleeps silently after all that stir. On the cold ground, his slouched body silently shifts between people as you blink. First, Gideon changes to Gus— a pale, yellow man with a green beanie. Then he becomes Gil, then he becomes Glen. These are variations of himself, different outcomes of different lives. During the blinks, when your eyes are closed, you imagine how each molecule of his body— each vertex that makes his shape and the colors assigned to them— shifts in position and orientation to make the new being. Some variations are cybernetic humans, others are pure, mutated aliens. But if what Gideon said is true, they are all just as true selves as one another. The limit to what he can change into is nonexistent. Any limit imposed upon him is a limit of stubbornness, *a limit of fear*.

You think to yourself, *the world should be so much freer than I thought.*

You think of an alien species only slightly different than ourselves— would we accept them? Are they not just mutated humans? What’s the difference? What’s the difference between anything if all things can transmute to become anything else?

They deserve to be human. That’s all you know. *They deserve to be with us.*

All this compassion makes you tired. You roll over to the other side, getting a blinding glimpse of the stars on the way. Leave now, and you can get out of this nightmare. But like Gideon said, it is as much of a nightmare as it is a dream. And so, you can’t help but remain sleepless, for you believe in a good ending to this all— the bright side of the contradiction, the part where there is a truth, the part that Gideon had promised nights earlier.

Chapter IV: The Reprise

Something has caught you on the slope, just as it becomes steep enough to be an avalanche of abstract shapes. It is Gideon, dragging you back up to the fringe where friction is enough to keep you steady. The Sun rises behind him, fluctuating with rigid waves. The resemblance of reality is so sharp and distinct here. Gideon quietly stares at the inverse horizon with a subtle, melancholic smirk. The air is cold, and the campfire has burnt its wood to ashes.

“It is time to stop looking at the dark side of the contradiction, and instead look at the bright side.

“In that pit of nihilism, I found something beautiful. It was like smelling the hazy, morning air after being stuck in concrete all night.”

“What was it?”

“Do you remember the Planck length? Do you remember the limit on how low abstractions can be by the fundamental conscious awareness? Do you remember how I said that as long as you are alive, you can only be close friends, but not lovers with the Great Contradiction?”

“I do.”

“Before those concepts made me angry, but then I realized, they are as much a gift as they are a detriment. The speed of light, the connection of our consciousness to our small bodies, the force of gravity keeping us isolated from the aliens... those rules are gifts. I realized that I could only become so silent, only become so inactive. The Great Contradiction was untouchable. Thank goodness! When this clicked in my head I sat up with a great fervor. While technology was still rapidly advancing, threatening to pull us down as close to the Planck length as possible, there were still at least a few untouched pockets hidden in the corners of Earth. In short, *there was still life to live.* I *had* to do something. *Something must happen.*

“Do you know what Camus was the father of?”

“The absurdist philosophy?”

“Yes, absurdism, the philosophy that is all about finding meaning in a meaningless life. Absurdism is about fighting against a world that wants you to be dead. Camus compared it to having an invincible summer within you as an endless winter poured snow around you. What I had felt was that *invincible summer*, pushing back against the swell, and climbing out of the slope of the singularity.

“Think about it: this entire conversation we are having is a testament to the philosophy that the contradiction has no bearing to kill us. We can’t help but refer to ourselves; I can’t help but refer to myself. I say ‘myself,’ and I say ‘I,’ betraying the concept of nonself. I can’t help but define the things around me and stay so attached to definitions. It is our nature as people who are alive to do so. No matter how small it is, even if technology does paint all the paintings and make our lives nearly useless, it will never paint every last one. There will still be some variant left undone for ages to go, there is still life to live.”

“I don’t know if ‘living’ counts as making a painting that differs by one pixel from a painting already created...”

“You are sort of right. Living, being finite, has a spectrum. The flame that lit within me during the day I stood up for the first time in so long was tiny compared to the flame in the hearts of my new friends hiking in forests and climbing the mountains. They had bonfires raging within them, summers so hot that the snow around them would melt so fast that their eyes wouldn’t even be able to register it. I learnt to envy their fires, not look at them as disgusting, as I had done during those earlier years. Suddenly, truth lost all its grand appeal I once assigned it. I felt a desperate need to rebel against the contradiction even further than my fundamental consciousness already did— *I needed to become enemies with the contradiction*. To be as alive as possible, to make the most of this strange planet I found myself on, I needed to beat the living daylight out of death.

“My limbs started to tingle as I clambered off the ground and began crawling away from the dense lines and abstract shapes. My body had been starved, with eons of energy stolen from it, but I couldn’t help but dance. Do a jig here and there, I was dancing beside the end of it all! I was so excited *to not understand*.

“I had a notepad in my pocket that whole time while I was sleeping, but I could never muster the ability to write a word on it until that fruitful dance.”

Gideon pulled a scrap of paper from his pocket and unfolded it before you. On it were the words:

To live is to lie to yourself and say you do exist.

“Do you understand why?” he asked.

“Not entirely. I think it’s somewhat to do with only looking at a slice of the infinite dimensionality of our universe and assuming it’s true, even if it’s not.”

“You are close. When I wrote this, I realized that the most alive people were the ones who told the most lies. They were the ones with utmost confidence in their beliefs, the ones who ignored the edge cases. They had things to *say*, they had effects to leave on the world. They were far off from dying as silent observers, in tune with the Great Contradiction. They were *rebels*. They embraced change while simultaneously refusing it. All that mattered is that they sought to do something to this world, rather than let it control them and keep them asleep. I wanted to become a rebel like them, for I now had a new view of what my long time spent gathering knowledge was like: imagine I have a shape-sorting cube, where the holes are unfilled. My search for understanding was me filling in the holes, completing the cube. But once the holes were filled, I had no more shapes to play with. What I had to do to become alive again was remove the shapes, and imbue the meaning back in life.

“I learnt to envy the religious, because they had what I always wanted: truth. To them, if they got lucky and avoided the edge cases, they died winning. They never had to be exposed to the contradictory nature of everything, and instead found bliss.

“Ignorance is bliss. Sound familiar?”

“That’s an old phrase. I never took it so literally, though.”

“Well my life philosophy does. Ignorance, for us and the few others with a deep understanding of the contradiction, was not possible, however. We had gone too far, and we couldn’t backtrack through ignorance. Instead, we had to actively force ourselves to lose our memory of the knowledge we gained. The lying began frivolously but culminated in a serious, active pursuit of believing in an absolute truth that wasn’t intangible. I started mimicking the hobbies of children, who, in their immature state, were experiencing the best of life. I climbed on remote playgrounds, I played new sports, I jumped in puddles and swam in dirty water. I was trying to be stupid. I was trying to forget everything I had learnt.”

“Did the memories of the contradiction not come back?”

“They most certainly did. Look— I’ve been talking to you about the contradiction for the past few days, no? I’ve been sitting out here in the cold alongside it. You found me climbing out of the singularity when we first met!”

“I did.”

“But does it look like I’m sad? Does recollecting the contradiction look painful to you?”

“Maybe yesterday it did, but today you seem much happier.”

“That’s because I twisted my perspective of how I saw the great contradiction. I was no longer staring at the dark side and nihilism, but I was now looking at the bright side with belief in meaning. The past few days consisted of me telling you just the consequences of an infinite universe, but you should know by how the contradiction functions, that the consequences are as horrible as the benefits are magnificent.”

“So what did you leave out? What are the benefits of the Great Contradiction?”

“An infinite universe gives us infinite space. Although it can become full, there will always be space. Imagine if our universe was a finite black box. What happens when we figure it out? We pass—there is nothing else to live for.

“Another benefit: as much as the contradiction kills you, it births you.

“And another: if you’re sad that the only truth is that there is no truth, then at least there is a truth!

“But that isn’t the full statement...”

“Who cares! I’m talking about the bright side of the penny! I’m accepting that I don’t have to see both at once to be fulfilled. I am choosing which place I want to collapse to. I am taking my life in superposition, where I loved everything as much as I hated everything, and choosing a few things to hate and a few things to love. What I truly began learning after that day I sprang out of sleep was how to collapse the wave function. I was learning how to create endings and beginnings. I was learning how to give great, personalized advice. I was learning how to believe in something, to take aphorisms to heart. I was learning how to sacrifice part of myself and be attached— *I was learning how to love*. Ultimately, I found the optimum partial truths which lined up with the human body— those which give a multitude of experiences to fill our sub-hundred-year lifetime and prevent boredom.

“Over the course of a few years, I found so much joy in my partial, *human truths*, that I finally found a moment— that brief infinitesimal time— where I forgot my past and the contradiction entirely:

“I was past the treeline, past the fields in the valleys, past the mountains, on the beach, where the sparkling ocean twinkled under a beautiful, bright sun. I was back in America, where I watched a traditional family of a stubborn, hard-working father; a calm and ever-friendly wife; a bratty, energetic boy; and a melancholic, hopeful daughter; relaxing with a picnic by their side on the sand. They were playing country music while lying upon the thatched red and white blanket, soaking up the mist poured in from the sea. The Sun fell below the horizon, and I realized that the cheesy love I called disgrace upon during my initial inquiry into the true nature of the universe was nothing more than what living was about. *That cheesy American love*. Have a boy and a girl, a loving wife. Have a traditional holiday. Have a religion to subscribe to. Have a job at a corporation. Have a best friend. Have a home in a safe neighborhood... the feeling was so immense in that moment that I nearly started tearing up. That was the first time I cried since my childhood. My period spent alongside the Great Contradiction had numbed me, but I was numb no more.

“I knew that it didn’t matter what life I chose, but that I just had to choose one of them. Whether it was something new or something I had nostalgia for, I didn’t care. It could’ve been cheesy American love, based on where I grew up in the West, or it could’ve been a life in a foreign country with a new religion. It didn’t matter. *I simply had to choose one.*”

“I still don’t understand how you ended up back here, on the abstract plane. If you found happiness and purpose in lying to yourself, then why throw it away and go back to the place that made you depressed?”

Gideon laughed before letting his cheeks fall to a frown. He looked away from you and let his eyes dawdle on the floating objects.

“As I said before,” he slowly began, “Pure ignorance— or in other words, *never having or wanting to search for understanding*— is the only way to stay away from the Great Contradiction forever. We have scars, my friend. When we undress at night, we will inevitably be reminded of our difficult past. We will be reminded of the war that tore our minds to shreds. The bliss that we veterans will find will only come in brief moments, like the peak of a rollercoaster by the bay. That is just how it is. I- I’m sorry. For the rest of our lives we will be fluctuating between places, cyclically returning to depression and ecstasy. But I assure you: those moments when you forget all about are magnificent to the point that they make you *melt*. Perhaps only when we turn senile, and our brains stop growing, will we get to experience a life without the contradiction again.”

You turn away from Gideon and wipe your brow. “Why would you tell me this?”

“Because- because I-”

You contain a yell within your tethered voice. “If it’s better to be ignorant of the truth then why would you explain it to me so vividly!? You put science behind it! You embedded it within my mind!”

Gideon sighed and tapped his thigh. “Because I’m selfish! Because I’m alone! Do you remember how I said that the purpose of life might be to feel as real as possible? Validation from other beings is what makes me feel real. I have no trust otherwise— I only have the Great Contradiction, which provides me no security at all. By telling other people this, I have spoken myself into existence. I have asserted that I know something and that it makes sense to you. Your agreement and listening is proof that I have a self, that I am alive. Without you, I am nothing more than a maniac daydreaming forever. *You...*”

“Why couldn’t you have just told me to turn back? Would it not have been easier to just physically push me away? Or to at least just scare me a little?”

“Forget I ever told you a thing,” Gideon mutters in response.

“What?”

“*Forget I ever told you a thing.*”

“I can’t,” you snap back.

“Then you will at least be able to understand why I have had to tell you this, because inevitably you will write down our conversation and share it with someone else, for when I pass, you *too* will be lonely. You *too* will understand.”

“I won’t,” you promise, “If everything you told me is true, then *this knowledge must die silently.*”

Gideon laughed and grabbed the mug of hot cocoa that swirled around him. He took a sip and crossed his legs, now looking at you intently. Keeping that position, he didn’t say another word. He simply stared as you stood up and looked at him with a pampered brow.

Postlude

Tired from four days of listening, you leave Gideon’s camp and hike back towards the treeline. The horizon returns to a flat line, and the shapes around you resume their detail. The bark on the trees becomes gristly again, the fields become more than vectors in the wind. You hope that this search for utopia was just a brief interlude. And while the air smells fresher, your vision remains slightly tinted. Every once in a while, a chunk will be missing from the ground, leaving a hole barreling towards infinity.

Promises... are impossible. They will change— they *must* change.

Gideon was right. About all of it.

With the help of lovely time, someone else will hear what you say, read what you write.