

THE WISDOM OF EVERYTHING

On Nature, Spirit, and How to Live in an Infinite World

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*We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of
all our exploring will be to arrive where we started
and know the place for the first time.*

— T. S. Eliot, Four Quartets

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Introduction: Two True Stories

There are two true stories about you, and they do not seem to fit together.

The first story is the one your body tells. You are a hungry animal on a finite planet. You need roughly two thousand calories a day or you weaken; you need water within days or you die; you need air within minutes or it is over. You were built by four billion years of competition for things there were never quite enough of—food, shelter, mates, safety, status—and you carry, in the oldest parts of your brain, a quiet voice that has been running since before there were words for it. The voice says: *watch out. Get yours. There might not be enough.* This story is true. You can feel it whenever you check your bank balance, or scan a room for who matters, or lie awake at three in the morning doing arithmetic with your one wild and precious life.

The second story is harder to say out loud without sounding like you have joined something. It is the story that every contemplative tradition on earth has tried to tell, that a surprising amount of modern physics seems to whisper, and that you yourself have probably stumbled into for a few seconds at a time—standing under a sky full of stars, holding someone as they died, watching your child sleep, or for no reason at all while doing the dishes. The story goes: you are not actually a separate speck adrift in an indifferent void. You are an expression of something without edges. Nothing is truly cut off from anything else. There is, at the deepest level, no shortage of being and nothing finally to fear. This story is also true. The trouble is that you cannot usually feel it and pay rent at the same time.

This book is about those two stories, and about the strange, painful, and wildly creative gap between them. It is the gap we live in. We are the only creatures we know of who can deduce that reality is infinite and then lie awake worrying about a parking space. We can recognize, in our best moments, that all things are connected—and then go to war over the color of skin or the name of God. We can hold both truths in one skull and act on only the smaller one. Nearly everything that has ever gone wrong between human beings lives in that gap. And nearly everything beautiful we have ever made—the symphonies, the cathedrals, the vaccines, the love poems—is an attempt to build a bridge across it.

I want to be honest with you from the first page about what kind of book this is and is not. It is not a self-help book; I am not going to promise that if

you breathe a certain way your problems will dissolve. It is not a religious book, though it takes religion seriously as some of the best data we have about the human interior. And it is not quite a science book, though I lean on science constantly, because science is the most rigorous tool we have ever built for checking whether our stories about reality are true. It is something older and humbler than any of those: an attempt to think clearly, all the way down, about what is actually the case—and then to ask the only question that finally matters, which is *how then should we live*.

The argument moves in six movements, and it moves the way I think understanding actually moves: outward to the largest thing, then inward to the smallest, then back again with something to bring home.

We begin with Nature, by which I mean not forests and oceans—though those too—but the whole of what is. I am going to make a claim there that sounds either obvious or insane, and is, I think, both: that everything exists. Not “many things.” Everything. I will try to show that this follows from a single fact you cannot doubt without proving it, and that it requires no faith of any kind. Then I will show you that physics, working entirely on its own, keeps arriving in the same neighborhood.

From the structure of reality we turn to Spirit—not as a supernatural rumor but as the plain observation that this infinite nature is, top to bottom, alive and interconnected, and that some part of us *already knows this*. We will look at how life itself is built out of cooperation and merger rather than only competition, at what happens in the brain when the sense of a separate self goes quiet, and at the astonishing fact that mystics on every continent, with no contact between them, came back from the inward journey reporting the same thing in different words. That convergence is one of the most underrated pieces of evidence in human history, and we will take it seriously.

Then the book turns and looks at us, and the weather changes. Scarcity is the hinge of the whole thing. Here we confront the animal in the title’s shadow—the creature shaped for not-enough, now living in a universe of more-than-enough, unable to feel it. This is, I will argue, the true root of human suffering: not sin in the old sense, not a curse, but a mismatch—an ancient and accurate map laid over a territory that has changed. We have built an entire inner world, a world made of words and status and us-versus-them, and then mistaken that small world for the whole of reality. Most of what we call evil is just what that small world looks like from the inside.

The last three parts are about what to do with all this. Ethics asks the question that haunts every honest person who has glimpsed the larger picture: can you actually get a way to *live* out of an infinite world? Doesn't "everything exists" dissolve right and wrong into mush? I will argue that the opposite is true—but only if we stop looking for a rulebook and learn instead to act from understanding, from honesty, from a hard-won peace with how things are. The deepest ethics, like the deepest truth, cannot be fully written down. *The Tao that can be spoken is not the eternal Tao*. But it can be lived, and recognized, and we can get better at it.

Politics then takes that ethics out into the crowd, into the one arena where our gap does the most damage at the largest scale—the game of governing one another. I will try to be fair to politics, because at its best it is a noble thing: the slow art of cooperating with strangers. But I will also try to be honest about how it curdles—how a calling becomes a herd, how words lose their meaning when people argue only to win, how our newest technologies have poured gasoline on the oldest fire in the brain. And I will make the case for a different kind of leadership, and a different kind of citizen: people for whom it is finally okay to say *I was wrong, I don't know, I'm sorry, help me understand*.

And then we go home. The Conclusion is the return trip—back from the totality of nature to the small, dear, maddening human world, carrying what we found. Because the point was never to escape being human. The point was to be human well: to feel, now and then, the source we came from, to untangle the wounded words we have wrapped around each other, and to build, together, the world we actually want to live in. We can. Everything is possible. In a sense I will try to earn rather than assert, everything already is.

A word about how I have tried to write this. I have refused to choose between rigor and warmth, because I think the choice is false and the insistence on it has done real harm—it has left the rigorous stuff locked in journals no one reads and the warm stuff floating free of anything true. So you will find hard arguments here, and real science with real names attached, and you will also find me talking to you like a person, because you are one and so am I. I have assumed you are smart. I have not assumed you already agree with me, or that you have read the things I have read. Where I lean on an idea from someone else, I have said whose it is, so you can go and check. I would rather you argue with this book than nod along to it.

One last thing before we start. You do not have to accept the largest claims to get the most important ones. If by the end you cannot quite swallow that *everything* exists, but you come away holding your own life and the lives around you a little more gently, less gripped by the three-in-the-morning voice, a little more willing to assume the stranger is not your enemy—then the book will have done its real work, and the metaphysics can take care of itself.

We are going to start as far out as it is possible to go: with the one thing you cannot doubt, and everything that turns out to follow from it.

Let's begin.

PART ONE

NATURE

The understanding of nature as infinite, and as everything

Why is there something rather than nothing? The sufficient reason is found in a substance which is a necessary being bearing the reason for its existence within itself.

— Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Monadology* (1714)

Before we can talk about how to live, we have to talk about where we live—and I mean that as literally as it can be meant. Not your house, not your country, not even your planet, but the whole arrangement: the totality of what is. Most arguments about ethics, politics, and meaning quietly assume an answer to this and then never look at it again. I want to do the opposite. I want to start with the largest possible question—what is the nature of reality itself?—and I want to start it from a place so solid that no one, however skeptical, can knock us off it.

This is the most demanding part of the book. It is the foundation everything else is built on, and like most foundations it is made of plain, hard material. Stay with it. By the end of these few chapters I hope to have shown you something genuinely strange: that from a single fact you already possess, with no faith and no leap, it follows that reality is infinite, that it contains everything, and that the universe is not the lonely scattering of objects-in-a-void that common sense reports. And then I will show you that the physicists, working with instruments instead of arguments, keep stumbling into the same room.

1. The Only Thing You Cannot Doubt

Let us find the floor.

Almost everything you believe could, in principle, be wrong. The chair you are sitting in might be a dream. Your memories might have been installed a moment ago, complete with the false sense that they stretch back years. The external world might be an elaborate simulation, your body an illusion, your friends figments. Philosophers have spent centuries trying to find a single belief that survives every possible doubt, and most candidates fall. *I have a body*—maybe not. *The world is real*—maybe not. *Two plus two is four*—well, a sufficiently powerful deceiver might be tampering even with that each time you check.

But there is one thing that cannot be doubted, and it cannot be doubted for a beautiful reason: the doubting itself proves it.

Something exists.

Notice how little this says, and how impossible it is to deny. Suppose you try. Suppose you say, “Perhaps nothing exists at all.” But your saying it is something. The thought is something. The doubt is something. The very effort to deny that anything exists is itself a thing that is happening, and so it refutes itself in the act. There is experience rather than no experience. Something is going on. *This*—whatever this is—is.

Descartes reached for this same bedrock four centuries ago with his famous *cogito ergo sum*, “I think, therefore I am.” But he actually grabbed more than he needed, and the extra is where the trouble starts. To say “I think” already smuggles in an *I*, a thinker, a self with edges—and that self is exactly the kind of thing that can be doubted. You do not need it. You do not need to know *who* is experiencing, or *what* is being experienced, or whether there is a unified “you” behind the experience at all. You need only the barest, most stripped-down fact, the one that remains when every other claim has been burned away:

There is something rather than nothing.

That is the floor. It is the one place to stand that no argument can take from you, because any argument against it is more evidence for it. And here is the quietly thrilling part, the part that the rest of this book hangs on: from this one fact—so thin it seems to say almost nothing—an enormous amount follows. Watch.

2. Why There Was Never Nothing

If something exists—and it does, undeniably—then absolute nothingness is not the case. That sounds trivial. It is not. Follow where it leads.

First we have to be precise about what “absolute nothing” would actually mean, because almost everyone who pictures “nothing” is secretly picturing something. They imagine empty space: a vast black emptiness. But space is not nothing. Space is a *something*—a stage with dimensions, a fabric that can bend and stretch, humming with the quantum activity we will come to shortly. They imagine darkness. But darkness is a visual experience; it has a character; it is something. They imagine the void before they were born, or after they die. But even that is conceived as a *place*, a backdrop, an absence-of-me within a world that goes on.

Absolute nothing is none of these. It is no space, no time, no darkness, no emptiness, no laws, no possibility, no potential, no *anything whatsoever*. It is not a thin reality; it is the complete cancellation of reality in every form. Try to actually hold it in your mind and you will find that you can’t—every image you reach for has some property, and nothing has no properties at all.

Now the crucial question: could *that*—absolute nothing—ever have been the case? Could there have been a state of affairs in which there was, truly, nothing?

The answer is no, and the reason is not a feeling or a preference. It is logic. If there had ever been absolute nothing, there would have been nothing to produce something. Nothing has no causal power, because to cause is to do, and there is nothing there to do anything. Nothing cannot “turn into” something, because turning-into is a process and a process is something. Nothing is not a fertile darkness pregnant with possibility—possibility is itself a kind of something. So if there had ever been *truly* nothing, there would be nothing now. But there is something now. Therefore there was never nothing.

The pre-Socratic Greek thinker Parmenides saw this twenty-five centuries ago and put it with a flat finality that still lands: *being cannot come from non-being*. What is, he said, “was not once, nor will it be, since it is, now, all at once.” Strip away the archaic phrasing and the point is clean and modern: you cannot get something from nothing, so if there is something—and there unmistakably is—then there was always something.

This reframes the oldest question in philosophy. People have asked for millennia, *why is there something rather than nothing?*—as though “nothing” were the natural default and “something” the thing that needs explaining, the surprise that requires a cause or a God or a cosmic accident. But the question contains a hidden false assumption. It assumes nothing was ever a real option, a live alternative that almost won. It wasn’t. Nothing was never on the table. It could not have been. The universe did not have to overcome nothingness to exist, because nothingness was never a competitor. The question dissolves: there is something rather than nothing because nothing was always impossible, and something is all there ever could have been.



Sit with how much we have already gotten for free. We started with the one fact no one can deny—*something exists*—and we have arrived at a second: *nothing is impossible; there was never nothing; there will never be nothing*. Being is not a flicker that lit up against a backdrop of the void. There is no backdrop. There is no void behind it. Now watch what that does to the shape of the universe.

3. The Universe Has No Edge

Picture the universe as a thing with a size. Common sense wants it to be like a very large room, or a very large ball—finite, with an outside. So let me ask the child’s question, the one that turns out to be devastating: what is past the edge?

Imagine you traveled to the very boundary of all that exists and reached out your hand. One of two things is true. Either there is *something* on the other side—in which case it isn’t the boundary, because reality keeps going—or there is *nothing* on the other side. But we have just spent a chapter establishing that nothing cannot exist. There is no nothing for reality to border against. A boundary, by definition, is a line between what is inside and what is outside. For the universe to have a boundary, there would have to be a genuine *outside*—a region of nothing where being stops. And that outside cannot exist, because nothing cannot exist.

So the edge cannot be there. And the same argument applies to whatever you imagined just past it, and just past that, forever. Any proposed limit to reality would itself be a thing—and so a part of reality, not its border—and whatever lies beyond it would have to be something too. There is no coherent way to draw the line. The very idea of an “outside of everything” is built from a word—*nothing*—that names no possible thing.

Therefore reality is unbounded. It has no edge, no wall, no final shore. And “unbounded” is just the plain-language meaning of a word we usually reserve for mathematics and mysticism: *infinite*. Not infinite in the loose sense of “really, really big,” the way we say a desert is endless when we mean merely vast. Infinite in the strict sense: without limit, without boundary, without any point at which being gives way to non-being—because there is no non-being for it to give way to.

Notice that this argument owes nothing to telescopes. It is not a claim about how many light-years the cosmos stretches or how the expansion is going. It is pure reasoning from the impossibility of nothing. Even if our particular bubble of space turned out to be finite in some measurable way, *reality as such*—the totality of what is—cannot be, because finitude requires an edge and an edge requires an outside and the outside would have to be nothing and nothing cannot exist. Reality goes all the way out, all the way in, all the way down, without terminus.

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And now the last step, the one that sounds like a leap but isn't. If reality is genuinely infinite—truly without limit—then can it be selective about what it contains? Can it be boundless in extent yet stingy in content, holding some possible things and refusing others?

It cannot, and the reason is the same reason as before, wearing new clothes. To exclude something—to say *this configuration of matter exists but that one does not, this experience is real but that one never occurs*—is to draw a line between the included and the excluded. It is to erect, inside reality, a little boundary: a wall between what is and what merely could-have-been-but-isn't. But a wall like that is a limit, and we have shown that reality has no limits. An infinite reality that left things out would be finite in at least one respect—bounded by at least one absence—and that contradicts its being infinite at all. The only way to be truly without limit is to leave nothing out.

Therefore everything exists. Every possible arrangement of matter. Every possible set of physical laws. Every possible form of life and mind. Every possible experience, every possible world, every possible being. Not as potential, not as something that might eventually get its turn, but actually, fully, here in the totality of what is. This is the conclusion the whole part has been climbing toward, and I want to lay the climb out in a single view so you can check each foothold:

Something exists. You cannot deny this without proving it.

Therefore nothing cannot exist. If there were ever nothing, nothing could ever arise—yet something has. So there was never nothing.

Therefore reality has no boundary. A boundary would be a border with nothing, and nothing isn't there to be bordered.

Therefore reality is infinite. That which has no boundary is, by definition, without limit.

Therefore everything exists. To leave anything out would be a limit, and the infinite has none.

This is not faith. It is not mysticism, though we will find the mystics here later, having arrived by another road. It is not even, at bottom, science, though science will back it up. It is a chain of plain deductions from a fact you cannot doubt. The only way out is to find a broken link—and every alternative I have ever been offered turns out to require, somewhere, the existence of

nothing, which is the one thing we have shown cannot be. Every road leads to infinity. Every road leads to everything.

4. The Trick of Time

I can feel the obvious objection rising, because it rose in me too. *If everything exists, you want to say, then where is it? Why am I stuck in this one ordinary life, this one body, this single plodding sequence of Tuesdays? If every possible experience is real, why do I only ever get this one?*

The answer is the most disorienting idea in the whole argument, and also, I think, the most liberating. The answer is that time is not what it feels like.

It is tempting to rescue “everything exists” by smuggling time back in—to say, *ah, given infinite time, everything will eventually happen*. But that quietly betrays the whole argument. It treats time as a great container, a stage that exists first, inside which infinity then plays out scene by scene. But time is not the stage. Time is part of the play. It is one of the things that exists *within* reality—one pattern among the infinite patterns, one structure among the structures—not the pre-existing frame in which reality is housed.

Everything does not exist because there is enough time for it all to occur. Everything exists because everything exists. Full stop. The sense you have right now of events marching forward—of the future not-yet, the present fleetingly here, the past gone for good—is itself a particular kind of experience. It is real *as* an experience. But it is one of the infinite experiences that *are*; it is not the machinery by which they come to be. The feeling of time passing is a thing reality contains, the way reality contains the color red or the smell of rain, not the conveyor belt on which reality is delivered.

If this sounds like the rambling of mysticism, hear it instead from physics, which arrived independently and reluctantly at nearly the same place. Einstein’s relativity dismantled the idea of a single universal “now.” It showed that whether two events happen “at the same time” depends on how you are moving; that time slows near mass and at speed; that there is no cosmic clock ticking the same moment for everyone everywhere. Two observers can genuinely disagree about which of two events came first, and both be right. When his lifelong friend Michele Besso died, Einstein wrote to the family that for “us believing physicists” the division of time into past, present, and future is “only a stubbornly persistent illusion.” In the “block universe” reading that many physicists take seriously, all moments simply *are*—past, present, and future laid out together like a landscape—and the flow we feel is a feature of how consciousness moves through that landscape, not a feature of the

landscape itself. That is precisely the picture the logic demands: everything exists; time is one of the ways a particular slice of existence is organized from the inside.

And the same dissolving move explains the other thing that troubles us—the apparent *edges* of our experience. The blank before birth. The dark after death. The void we seem to sense beyond the farthest stars. These feel like proof of nothingness, like the void pressing in at the rim of being. But they are not the edge of reality; they are the edge of a *viewpoint*. From any finite vantage point inside the infinite, reality is going to look bounded—it will have a horizon, a beyond-which-I-cannot-see. But the horizon is not the edge of the world. It is the limit of where you happen to be standing. Walk toward it and it recedes. The ocean does not end where you can no longer see it. Neither does being.

5. Facing the Hard Questions

I have just made an enormous claim, and if you are the kind of reader I am hoping for, you are not nodding along—you are pushing back. Good. A claim this large should have to survive its strongest objections out in the open, not be hurried past. So before we look at what science adds, let me stop and take the hardest questions head-on, in plain language, because how the argument answers them tells you a great deal about what it is and is not saying.

Isn't this just the multiverse—a fashionable bit of speculation that can never be tested? No, and the distinction matters more than anything else in this part. The physical multiverse of the cosmologists is an empirical hypothesis; it may be true or false, and physicists rightly argue about whether it can ever be confirmed. But the argument of these chapters is not that hypothesis. It is a chain of logic that runs entirely on premises you already accept, and it would remain exactly as strong if every physicist abandoned the multiverse tomorrow. I am not asking you to trust a theory about bubble universes. I am asking you to find the broken link in a chain: something exists, nothing cannot exist, therefore no boundary, therefore infinite, therefore everything. If the conclusion is false, one of those steps must fail—and I invite you, sincerely, to locate which one. Most people who reject the conclusion have not found a faulty step; they have simply found the conclusion strange. Strangeness is not refutation. Much of what is true is strange.

If everything exists, why is the world so orderly? Why does it follow stable laws instead of dissolving into chaos? This is the sharpest objection, and it has a clean answer. Yes—if everything exists, then so do all the chaotic, lawless, incoherent configurations. But ask what it takes to be *you*: a stable, persisting pattern complex enough to wonder about any of this. Such a pattern can only arise and continue within a regime regular enough to support it. A mind is a kind of order; it cannot form, let alone ask questions, in a neighborhood of pure noise. So the orderliness you observe is not evidence against everything existing—it is exactly what *any* observer must find, wherever they are, because observers only exist in the orderly stretches. You are not seeing a tidy universe because the universe is tidy everywhere. You are seeing a tidy corner because only tidy corners grow eyes. The chaos is out there in the totality; it simply has no one inside it to complain.

But isn't infinity itself mathematically incoherent—full of paradoxes? You may have heard of Hilbert's Hotel, the imaginary hotel with infinitely many rooms, all full, that can somehow always fit one more guest. These paradoxes are real and delightfully counterintuitive, and they are sometimes wielded to argue that an actual infinity cannot exist. But notice what they actually show: that infinite sets behave differently from finite ones, not that they are self-contradictory. Mathematicians have worked rigorously with infinity for over a century—Cantor even showed there are different *sizes* of infinity—without anyone deriving a true contradiction. The hotel is weird, not impossible. And in any case, the load-bearing step of our argument is not some fancy property of infinite arithmetic. It is the impossibility of nothing. "Infinite" here means only *unbounded*—lacking an edge—and an edgeless reality is no more paradoxical than a circle, which also has no edge and troubles no one.

Aren't you just playing word games with "nothing"? It can feel that way, because the argument turns on a word. But the claim is substantive, not semantic, and you can check it against the world. The argument says there is no true void anywhere—no place where being simply stops. That is not a definition I am stipulating; it is a prediction, and as we are about to see, it is the prediction the laboratory confirms. The vacuum is not empty. There is no nothing to be found, no matter how hard we look. A word game makes no testable predictions. This one does, and it keeps winning.



There is one more objection, and it is the most important, because it is not really about whether the argument is *true* but about whether it *matters*. Suppose you grant the whole thing. Suppose reality is infinite and contains everything. *So what?* You still have to go to work. The rent is still due. How could an abstract fact about the totality of being possibly change how you live on a Tuesday?

This is the question the entire rest of the book exists to answer, so I will only plant the seed here. The reason it matters is that you are *already* living by an answer to this question—you simply absorbed it without noticing. Underneath your days runs a set of background assumptions about what reality fundamentally is: that you are a separate self, walled off in a body; that the world is a scarce and largely indifferent place; that other people are, at bottom, competitors; that you are, in the end, alone. You did not reason your way to these assumptions. You inherited them, from your biology and your

culture, and they shape everything—how you treat strangers, what you chase, what you fear at three in the morning. What I am claiming is that those background assumptions are *false*, and that the truer picture—infinite, connected, enough—is not just more beautiful but more accurate, and that living from an accurate picture of reality rather than a distorted one changes, quite literally, everything. Not because it hands you new commandments, but because it dissolves the fear and the sense of separation from which so much of our trouble grows. That is a strong promise. I intend to earn it across the rest of these pages.

And if, in the end, you cannot accept the maximal claim—if “everything exists” remains a bridge too far—I want you to know that you can set it down and keep the core. You do not need the full infinity to receive most of what this book offers. You need only to take seriously that you are far less separate than you feel, and that the scarcity you carry is older than your circumstances. Those two recognitions, even on their own, are enough to change a life. The metaphysics is the foundation. But you can live in a house without spending all your time in the basement.

6. What the Physicists Found

I have been careful to insist that the argument so far is pure logic. It needs no laboratory. It would be true if there had never been a single experiment. So what I am about to tell you is not the proof—the proof is already finished—but something that I find genuinely moving, and that you are entitled to weigh: over the last hundred years, physicists chasing reality with instruments rather than syllogisms have kept arriving in the same strange country that the logic mapped out. They were not trying to confirm any philosophy. Many of them would be annoyed to be cited here. They followed the data. And the data keeps describing a universe that is interconnected, edgeless, and never truly empty—exactly the universe the argument requires.

Let me show you three places where this happens.

Nothing turns out to be impossible—in the lab

Our very first step was that nothing cannot exist. Quantum physics says the same thing, and it says it about the most promising candidate for “nothing” we have ever found: the vacuum.

Empty space was supposed to be the real article—remove every particle, every photon, chill it to absolute zero, and surely you are left with genuine nothing. You are not. The quantum vacuum is not empty; it seethes. The Heisenberg uncertainty principle forbids any field from sitting at perfectly zero energy, so even in “empty” space the fields that make up reality are never still. They fluctuate. Virtual particles flicker into being and wink back out. There is a residual, irreducible hum called zero-point energy that cannot be removed, because removing it would require the kind of perfect stillness the universe does not permit.

This is not a theorist’s daydream. It has a fingerprint you can measure: the Casimir effect. Place two uncharged metal plates a hair’s breadth apart in a vacuum and they are pushed together by a tiny but real force—the pressure of the vacuum’s own restless energy, slightly stronger outside the gap than within it. The void, in other words, pushes back when you try to make a pocket of true emptiness. At the deepest level our instruments can reach, *there is no nothing*. The emptiness between the stars, the gap between your hand and this page, the space inside an atom that makes matter mostly hollow—none of it is actually empty. It is full of fields, full of fluctuation, full of being.

Common sense told us reality was islands of stuff in an ocean of void. Physics says there is no void; there is only ocean, with the islands as its waves.

Even the Big Bang, often described in headlines as the universe “popping out of nothing,” is nothing of the sort in the actual physics. The serious models—the Hartle–Hawking no-boundary proposal, Vilenkin’s tunneling scenarios, the various eternal-inflation pictures—describe our observable universe not as an eruption from absolute non-being but as a transition, a fluctuation, a local reorganization within a deeper reality that was never absent. Whatever came “before” our cosmos, the equations agree on one thing: it was not nothing. It is never nothing.

Everything turns out to be connected

The argument concludes that reality is a single unbounded whole that excludes nothing—that what looks like a crowd of separate things is, at bottom, one. Here quantum mechanics produced perhaps the most shocking experimental result of the twentieth century, and it points the same way.

When two particles interact and then fly apart—to opposite ends of a building, or in principle opposite ends of the galaxy—they can remain *entangled*: bound together so that measuring one instantly tells you something true about the other, with correlations far too strong for any story in which they are really separate objects carrying their own private properties. In 1964 the physicist John Bell proved this could be tested. He showed that if the world were “locally real”—if things had definite independent properties and nothing traveled faster than light—then certain measurements would have to obey a strict numerical limit. Quantum mechanics predicted that limit would be broken. The experiments were done: by Alain Aspect in the early 1980s, and then with every conceivable loophole sealed by teams led by Anton Zeilinger, John Clauser, and Ronald Hanson, work that won the 2022 Nobel Prize in Physics. The limit is broken, exactly as quantum theory said. The universe is not locally real. Separation, at the deepest level, is not the fundamental fact it appears to be.

Physicists have spent decades reaching for ways to picture this. David Bohm proposed an “implicate order,” an enfolded wholeness out of which the world of apparently separate things unfolds, like a single pattern projected into seeming multiplicity. The holographic principle, developed by Gerard ‘t Hooft and Leonard Susskind, suggests that everything happening within a

volume of space can be fully described by information on its boundary—hinting that the solid three-dimensional separateness we experience is something like a projection of a deeper, less divided reality. The details are contested and the field is young. But the through-line is unmistakable, and it matches the logic: *what looks like many is, underneath, one.*

The universe turns out to have no edge

Finally, the cosmologists. When they measure the actual shape of space, what do they find? Not a sphere that curves back on itself, not a box with walls. As best we can measure, space is *flat*—and a flat universe is spatially infinite. The light from the early universe, the cosmic microwave background, was mapped in exquisite detail by the WMAP and Planck satellites, and its geometry comes out flat to within a tiny margin. The “observable universe,” that sphere about 46 billion light-years in every direction, is not the edge of anything; it is merely as far as light has had time to reach us. Beyond it, every indication is that space simply continues.

And the leading theory of the universe’s first instant, cosmic inflation, does not naturally produce one universe. It produces endless ones. In the eternal-inflation models of Alan Guth, Andrei Linde, and Alexander Vilenkin, inflation never fully stops; it keeps spawning “pocket universes” like bubbles in a foam without end, each potentially with its own physical constants. The mathematics points not to a single cosmos but to an unbounded ensemble of them. The physicist Max Tegmark has pushed this to its logical extreme with his “mathematical universe hypothesis”: the proposal that every mathematically consistent structure exists, physically, somewhere—a conclusion you may notice is almost word-for-word the conclusion we reached by pure logic in Chapter 3. *Everything that can be, is.*



Let me be careful and fair, because I have just spent pages enlisting the most prestigious science of our age and I do not want to overclaim. None of this *proves* the metaphysical argument. Physics is provisional; theories get revised; the multiverse in particular is fiercely debated and may never be directly testable. I am not telling you the scientists have signed off on “everything exists.” Most have never considered the question and would shrug at it.

What I am telling you is something subtler and, to me, more haunting. Two completely independent methods—one a chain of armchair logic running from “something exists,” the other a century of telescopes and particle detectors and Nobel-winning experiments—have converged on the same unlikely portrait of reality. A reality with no true emptiness anywhere in it. A reality where separation is a surface appearance over a deeper unity. A reality with no edge, plausibly infinite, plausibly containing far more than the one world we see. When two strangers who have never spoken describe the same face, you begin to suspect there is a face.

That is the nature we live in. Not a finite scattering of lonely objects in an indifferent dark, but a single, edgeless, inexhaustible whole, without an outside, leaving nothing out—and you, reading this, are not a spectator parked at its rim. You are one of the places it is happening. Hold on to that, because in the next part we are going to find that this whole is not cold and not dead. It is alive, it is woven together, and some part of you has known it all along.

PART TWO

SPIRIT

*How all things are alive and interconnected, how
we know this innately, and how the same truth
surfaces in every human spirituality*

*The Tao that can be spoken is not the eternal Tao. The name
that can be named is not the eternal name. The nameless is the
origin of heaven and earth.*

— Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, Chapter 1 (c. 6th century BCE)

In the first part we found that nature is infinite, edgeless, and complete—a single whole that leaves nothing out. That was the skeleton. Now we put flesh on it, and the flesh turns out to be alive.

The word “spirit” makes some readers reach for the exits, and I understand why—it has been used to sell a great deal of nonsense. So let me say plainly what I do not mean by it. I do not mean a ghost, a soul-substance, a force you can buy crystals to align. I mean something more modest and, I think, more astonishing: the observation that the infinite nature we just described is not inert. It is woven through with life and connection, top to bottom; that this connection is not a poetic flourish but a measurable feature of how living things actually work; that human beings have a faculty for *feeling* this connection directly; and that when they have followed that faculty inward, in every culture and every century, they have come back saying the same thing. “Spirit” is my name for that whole phenomenon—the aliveness of the whole, and our innate capacity to recognize it. This part is the evidence for it.

7. The Living Whole

Start with a fact about your own body that almost no one is told as a child, because it would change how they understand themselves for the rest of their lives.

You are not one organism. You are a city.

In and on your body live somewhere around thirty trillion bacteria, fungi, and other microbes—comparable in number to your own cells, carrying hundreds of times more genes than your human genome. They are not freeloaders. They digest your food, train your immune system, manufacture vitamins and neurotransmitters, and influence your mood. Strip them away and you do not become a purer, more essential version of yourself; you sicken and die. The boundary you imagine around your “self”—the skin-bag containing the real you—is, biologically, a fiction of convenience. You are a collaboration. You always have been.

This is not a quirk of human anatomy. It is the basic architecture of life, and once you see it you cannot unsee it. The single most important event in the history of complex life on Earth was not a competition. It was a merger. Billions of years ago, one simple cell engulfed another and, instead of digesting it, kept it—and the swallowed cell became the mitochondria that now power every cell in your body, and in every animal, plant, and fungus alive. The biologist Lynn Margulis spent years being told this was absurd before it became textbook orthodoxy: the eukaryotic cell, the foundation of all the visible life around you, was born when two beings became one. The deepest root of the family tree is an act of cooperation so total that the partners stopped being separate.

The pattern repeats at every scale, like a signature. Multicellular life is single cells giving up their independence to become a body. An ant colony behaves less like a crowd of insects than like one distributed animal. And beneath the forest floor runs what the ecologist Suzanne Simard documented and others dubbed the “wood wide web”: a vast network of fungal threads linking the roots of trees into a single communicating system, through which old “mother trees” send sugar to their seedlings, and through which trees of different species warn one another of insect attacks and shuttle nutrients to whoever is in shade. The forest is not a collection of separate trees competing

for light. It is, in a real and measurable sense, a single cooperating organism wearing the disguise of many.

For a long time we told ourselves a different story about nature—“red in tooth and claw,” a gladiatorial arena where every creature claws past every other. That story is not false, exactly; competition is real and we will spend a whole part of this book on what it has done to us. But it was always only half the picture, and recent biology has restored the other half. The mathematician Martin Nowak has shown that cooperation is not a fragile exception that selfishness keeps threatening to overrun—it is one of evolution’s fundamental creative principles, sitting alongside mutation and selection as a basic engine of new complexity. Again and again, the great leaps in the history of life—cells, bodies, colonies, ecosystems, societies—happen when separate things discover they are better off joined. Life does not merely compete. Life merges, shares, signals, and binds itself together. The separateness of organisms is a useful approximation, not a deep truth.

Step back and notice what this means in the language of the first part. We argued, from logic, that reality is a single whole and that separation is a surface appearance over a deeper unity. Now biology hands us the same conclusion from the opposite direction: living things, examined closely, are not the sealed individuals they appear to be. The cell is a merger. The body is a colony. The forest is a network. You are an ecosystem. Connection is not something life occasionally achieves. Connection is what life *is*. The infinite, interconnected whole of Part One is not a cold geometry. It is breathing.

8. The Knowledge in the Body

Here is the question that has fascinated me more than any other while writing this book. If all of this is true—if we really are expressions of a single interconnected whole—then you would expect some trace of it to show up in us directly. Not as a doctrine we are taught, but as something we can *feel*, the way a wave, if it could feel anything, might feel the ocean it has never left. And it turns out we can. The trace is there. We have simply been trained to ignore it.

Almost everyone has had at least a flicker of it. A night under a clear desert sky when the sheer scale of things stops your inner monologue and, for a moment, the line between you and the dark and the stars goes soft. Falling so completely into music or work or love that “you” disappear and there is only the doing. The strange, wordless certainty that can come at a birth or a deathbed that something larger is moving through the room. We tend to file these away as nice moods, brain quirks, not to be taken seriously. I want to suggest we have it exactly backward—that these are not malfunctions but *clear seeing*, the rare moments when the usual filter drops and we perceive our actual situation.

What is the filter? Neuroscience has been quietly closing in on an answer, and it is one of the most beautiful findings of the last twenty years. There is a network in your brain, the default mode network, that hums along whenever you are not focused on a task—daydreaming, ruminating, narrating. It is the seat of the autobiographical self: the voice that keeps up the running story of *me*, my past, my future, my standing, my problems. It is, in a sense, the machinery that manufactures the felt sense of being a separate someone walled off inside a skull, looking out at a world that is not-you.

And here is the remarkable part. When that machinery goes quiet, the experience that arises is not blankness, not a void, not loneliness. It is *unity*. Researchers have watched this happen in real time. Studies of long-term meditators—Richard Davidson’s work at Wisconsin among the most rigorous—show distinctive, stable changes in the brain, including unusual patterns of high-frequency gamma activity and measurable growth in regions tied to attention and emotional regulation. Sara Lazar’s team at Harvard found that even eight weeks of ordinary mindfulness practice thickens gray matter in areas involved in learning and memory and shrinks reactivity in the amygdala,

the brain's alarm bell. And when scientists at Johns Hopkins and Imperial College London gave volunteers psilocybin under careful conditions, the people who reported the classic mystical experience—the dissolving of the boundary between self and world, an overwhelming sense of unity and connection—turned out, on the brain scans, to be the ones whose default mode network had gone quiet. Robin Carhart-Harris's research made the link explicit: turn down the self-generating chatter, and what floods in is the experience of being part of everything. Roland Griffiths's studies found that these experiences are not fleeting curiosities; people rank them, years later, among the most meaningful events of their lives, and they leave behind durable increases in openness, well-being, and care for others.

Read those results next to the argument of Part One and a stunning possibility comes into focus. The sense of being a separate self is not a perception of reality. It is a *construction*—useful, evolved, mostly running in the background—and when the construction relaxes, what is revealed is the connection that was there all along. The self was the filter. It was the thing making the whole look like fragments, the infinite look finite, the connected look alone. Quiet it, and you do not lose touch with reality; you make contact with it. The mystics were not hallucinating an imaginary unity. They were switching off the apparatus that hallucinates a separation.

This is why I say the deepest knowledge is not learned but *recognized*. Plato had an intuition of this twenty-four centuries ago with his idea of anamnesis—that real learning is a kind of remembering, the soul recovering what it already knew. I think he was reaching toward something true, even if his particular theory of a prior life among perfect Forms was an unnecessary detour. It is not that you once lived somewhere else and are dimly recalling it. It is that consciousness, being itself an expression of the infinite whole, already *is* what it is trying to understand. The wave does not have to travel to reach the ocean. It does not have to be taught that it is wet. It needs only to stop mistaking itself for something separate from the water. Recognition is not the acquisition of a new fact. It is the ending of a forgetting.

And the body keeps the receipts. This is the part I find almost unbearably moving: your physiology is not neutral about which story you live by. The work of Barbara Fredrickson shows that practicing loving-kindness—deliberately wishing others well—raises vagal tone, a marker of cardiovascular health and resilience, and widens the range of positive

emotion. Dacher Keltner's research on awe, the feeling that washes over us in the presence of vastness, finds that it lowers markers of inflammation, makes people more generous, and shrinks the bloated sense of self-importance that drives so much misery. Connection, it turns out, is not only true and not only good; it is *healthy*, in the dull clinical sense that it shows up in your blood work. Isolation sickens the body. Belonging heals it. It is not a metaphor to say that love is good for you and contempt is poison. It is physiology. The whole, it seems, has wired its parts to feel, in their very flesh, when they are living in accordance with what they are.

9. The Child and the Animal

There is a simple test of whether a piece of knowledge is truly innate rather than taught: look at the beings who have not yet been taught anything. Look at small children, and look at animals. If the recognition of the connected, living whole is really written into us beneath all culture, then we should find its traces in exactly the creatures who have not been to school, not read the scriptures, not absorbed a philosophy. And we do.

Watch a very young child—before the relentless work of socialization has fully installed the separate, scarcity-driven self. What you see is a being in a state that the contemplatives spend decades of practice trying to return to. The child is almost entirely in the present moment; the past and future that torment the adult mind have barely formed. The child is porous, with a self not yet hardened into the defended fortress it will become; the boundary between me and not-me is still soft and negotiable. The child meets a beetle, a puddle, a stranger's dog, a patch of light on the floor, with a quality of attention we can only call wonder—a total, undefended fascination with the sheer *thatness* of things, the astonishing fact that anything exists at all. We say the child is “easily amazed,” as though this were a deficiency, a failure to have gotten used to things yet. I want to suggest the opposite. The child is not failing to be appropriately bored. The child is seeing clearly, with the filter not yet fully built, and *we* are the ones who have lost something—who have, through long training, learned to stop seeing the miracle that is still, every second, right in front of us. Wordsworth was not being merely sentimental when he wrote of childhood as a time when the world appeared “apparelled in celestial light.” He was reporting data.

And then we educate it out of them, and out of ourselves. This is not a conspiracy; much of it is necessary. The child *must* learn the small world—must learn that this is mine and that is yours, that you are you and I am I, that there is not always enough and you must sometimes compete for it. This is the installation of the scarcity self, and the child cannot function in human society without it. But notice what is happening: we are not teaching the child a truth it lacked. We are teaching it to *stop seeing* a truth it already had, and to replace that seeing with the useful fiction of separateness. The “innocence” we mourn in lost childhood is not ignorance. It is a kind of accurate perception that we trade, of necessity, for competence in the small world—and then spend the rest of our lives, if we are lucky and pay attention, trying to win

back without losing the competence. The whole project of this book could be described as learning to see again the way you saw before you were taught not to, while keeping everything you have learned since.



Now look at the animals, who are never taught not to see. I am wary here, because it is easy to sentimentalize them, to project a wisdom they do not have. An animal cannot do what you are doing right now—cannot follow an argument about infinity, cannot reflect on its own existence, cannot choose, as we will spend the rest of this book learning to choose. Their lack of our self-consciousness is a real lack; it is the very thing that lets them be cruel without conscience and prevents them from ever writing a book like this one. I am not romanticizing them into gurus. But notice what their lack of our particular kind of self *also* spares them. An animal does not lie awake rehearsing its status. It does not poison today with dread of a future it has imagined or regret for a past it cannot change. It does not manufacture scarcity out of symbols. It is, to a degree we find almost unbearable to contemplate, simply *here*—fully present in its one life, woven without protest into the web of the living world, doing what it is without the agonized refusal that Camus said defines our species. The animal has the presence without the awareness; we have the awareness without the presence. And the strange, specific human task—the one this whole book is circling—is to become the only kind of creature that could ever have both at once: as awake to the present and as woven into the whole as an animal, and as conscious of it all as only a human can be.

Why does any of this matter for the argument? Because it closes off the easy escape from everything the last chapter claimed. If the recognition of the living, connected whole were a doctrine—a belief transmitted by culture—then it could be dismissed as one more story humans tell, no truer than any other. But it shows up *before* the doctrines, in the pre-verbal wonder of children who have been taught nothing, and its shadow falls across the wordless presence of animals who could never be taught at all. It is not downstream of culture. It is upstream of it. Culture, with its small world of words and status and scarcity, is the thing that gets *added*—and the thing that, too often, buries the original seeing under a lifetime of useful fictions. Which is exactly why the same recognition can be lost for centuries and then found again from scratch by anyone, of any tradition or none, who gets quiet

enough to look. It was never really transmitted in the first place. It was only ever remembered. And a child, or a quiet hour with an animal, can remind you that it is still there, under everything, waiting—the oldest knowledge you have, the one you were born holding and only later learned to set down.

10. The Same Light in Every Window

So far I have leaned on physics and biology and neuroscience—the prestige instruments of our own moment. But there is another body of evidence, far older and, I will argue, just as serious, that we have been trained to discount precisely because it comes dressed in the robes of religion. It is this: for at least three thousand years, in every literate civilization and a great many non-literate ones, with no possibility of contact or copying between them, human beings who turned their attention all the way inward have come back reporting the same discovery, in wildly different vocabularies.

I want you to hold off on the reflex to say “well, people believe all sorts of things.” That reflex is right about doctrines—the doctrines are gloriously, irreconcilably different. But underneath the doctrines, at the level of direct report, there is a convergence so specific and so repeated that it cries out for an explanation. Let me walk you through it, quickly, so you can feel the pattern for yourself.

In India, the oldest layer comes through the Upanishads, composed roughly between 800 and 300 BCE. “In the beginning,” says the Chandogya Upanishad, “this was Being alone, one only without a second.” Behind all the changing forms is Brahman—infinite, undivided consciousness—and the individual self, Atman, is not a separate thing cut off from it but, at the deepest level, identical to it. *Tat tvam asi*, the formula goes: *thou art that*. You are not a droplet longing for the ocean. You are the ocean, briefly shaped as a droplet. The Buddha, a few centuries later, refused to speak of an eternal Brahman, but arrived at the same non-separateness from the other side: his teaching of dependent origination says that nothing exists on its own, that every thing arises only in relation to everything else, in endless mutual conditioning. Nagarjuna later sharpened this into the doctrine of emptiness—not nihilism, but the recognition that things are “empty” of independent existence precisely *because* they are infinitely interdependent. “Form is emptiness, emptiness is form,” says the Heart Sutra: the particular and the infinite are not two.

In Greece, Anaximander named the source of all things the *apeiron*—the boundless, the limitless—around 570 BCE, the first person in the Western record to put infinity at the foundation of reality. Parmenides, whom we have already met, argued that being is one, eternal, and uncreated. The Stoics

spoke of *pneuma*, a living breath pervading and connecting the whole cosmos, and of *sympatheia*, the responsiveness of every part of the universe to every other—Marcus Aurelius writing, on campaign, of the world as a single living organism. And Plotinus, in the third century, gave the West perhaps its most rigorous vision of unity: the One, beyond all limit and description, from which all things flow as light flows from the sun, never actually separate from their source.

In China, the Tao Te Ching describes “something nebulous yet complete, born before heaven and earth... standing alone, unchanging... the mother of all under heaven.” The Tao is the infinite, undifferentiated source—and yet it is not somewhere else, not above the world; it is what each thing most deeply is. Zhuangzi turned this into a philosophy of laughing humility, his butterfly dream needling our certainty that we even know which side of a boundary we are on, his “equality of things” insisting that from the standpoint of the whole, all the distinctions we fight over flatten into one. And when Buddhism met Taoism and became Chan, or Zen, the result was some of the most direct language ever produced for this recognition: Huangbo’s “One Mind” that all beings share, the diversity of the world like waves on a single sea.

In the Abrahamic mystical traditions—the ones we think of as most committed to a separate, commanding God—the same recognition keeps breaking through, often at great personal cost to those who voiced it. Jewish Kabbalah names the infinite *Ein Sof*, “without end,” and the Zohar dares to say that “God is everything and everything is God.” The Sufi master Ibn Arabi taught *wahdat al-wujud*, the unity of being—that there is finally only one reality, and all apparently separate things are its faces. Rumi put it in a line you have probably seen on a wall: “You are not a drop in the ocean. You are the entire ocean in a drop.” Meister Eckhart, the Christian mystic, said that “the eye with which I see God is the same eye with which God sees me,” and Nicholas of Cusa wrote that in the infinite all opposites coincide and God is “not other” than creation. These were not fringe cranks; they were among the most serious religious minds their traditions produced. Several were condemned, banned, or killed for it—a fact we will return to, because it matters enormously.

And the same recognition lives, fully formed, in traditions that never wrote a word of philosophy. The Lakota say *Mitakuye Oyasin*—“all my relations”—not as a greeting but as a statement about the kinship of all beings. Aboriginal

Australian cosmology describes a Dreaming in which past, present, and future coexist, an intuition eerily close to the block universe of Part One. The southern African ethic of *Ubuntu* holds that a person is a person through other persons—"I am because we are." The Yoruba speak of *ashe*, the life-force flowing through all things. These are not crude first drafts of the more sophisticated philosophies. They are independent arrivals at the same summit, by people who climbed a different face of the same mountain.



Now, what do we do with this convergence? There are really only a few options.

We could say it is coincidence—but the agreement is far too specific and far too repeated to be chance. We could say it is cultural borrowing—but many of these traditions developed in total isolation from one another, separated by oceans and millennia. We could say it is wishful thinking, people inventing a comforting story—but that explanation collapses on contact with the facts, because these insights were frequently delivered *against* the dominant beliefs of the speaker's own culture, and got their authors exiled, excommunicated, and executed. People do not usually invent comforting fantasies that get them burned at the stake.

That leaves the explanation I find by far the most parsimonious, even though it is the most demanding: they were all describing the same thing because there is a same thing to describe. They turned their attention to the one reality we all share, looked as clearly as their training allowed, and reported back in the only vocabulary they had. The words differ because the languages and cultures differ. The finding is constant because reality is constant. The mystics of the world are not a chorus of people fooling themselves in unison. They are something more like a network of independent instruments, scattered across the globe and across history, all registering the same signal. When that many needles, wired to no common source, swing the same way, the honest conclusion is that there is a field.

11. Where the Traditions Part Ways

I have to be honest with you now, because I have just made the convergence sound tidier than it is, and an argument that hides its difficulties does not deserve your trust. The traditions do not actually agree about everything. They disagree, often sharply, and a fair-minded skeptic will want to know whether the disagreements sink the whole case. So let me put the strongest version of that worry on the table and answer it.

The disagreements are real and they are not small. Is the ultimate reality *personal*—a God who knows and loves you—or *impersonal*, like the Tao or Brahman-without-qualities, closer to a ground of being than a being? The theistic traditions say one thing; much of Buddhism and Taoism says nearly the opposite. Does the individual self *survive*, perfected, into eternal union—or does it *dissolve* entirely, like a drop returning to the sea, with no one left over to enjoy the homecoming? Christianity and Islam tend toward the first; Buddhism, with its teaching of no-self, leans hard toward the second. Is the world we live in a *real* creation to be redeemed, or an *illusion*, *maya*, to be seen through and escaped? The traditions split on this too. These are not quibbles. People have argued, schismed, and occasionally killed over them for centuries.

So how can I claim convergence in the face of so much divergence? Here is the distinction that holds the whole thing together, and it is worth grasping firmly. The disagreements are almost entirely at the level of *interpretation and doctrine*—the conceptual scaffolding each culture built around the experience, in its own language, to its own inherited questions. The agreement is at the level of the *experience itself*, and of its most basic report. Strip away the theology and look at what the contemplatives actually describe having undergone, and the descriptions snap into alignment with uncanny precision: the dissolving of the boundary between self and world; the sense that separation was somehow never as real as it seemed; an encounter with something boundless; and—this is the part that recurs most stubbornly of all—the conviction that what lies beneath everything is not cold or hostile but, in some way the words always strain to carry, loving. *That* is the convergence. It is not that everyone draws the same map. It is that everyone reports arriving at the same territory, and then draws the map their culture handed them.

Think of it this way. Imagine a hundred people from a hundred countries each climb a mountain from a different side, in a different season, speaking a different language. When they come down, they will give wildly different accounts of the *climb*—the northern face was icy, the southern slope was wildflowers, this one took three days and that one took five. If you focused only on the trail reports you might conclude they had climbed different mountains. But ask them what they saw from the summit, and they all describe the same thing: that the world opens out, that the boundaries between the fields below disappear into one continuous land, that you can see impossibly far, that it is silent and vast and somehow makes everything down below look small and dear at once. The trail reports are the doctrines. The view from the summit is the recognition. We have been comparing trail reports and concluding the mountain is a fiction. Look instead at the view.



I want to be careful not to overclaim, because there is a serious scholarly counterargument and you deserve to know it exists. Some philosophers of religion—the “constructivists”—argue that there is no such thing as a raw, culture-free experience underneath the interpretations; that the Buddhist has a Buddhist experience and the Christian a Christian one all the way down, shaped by expectation before it even arrives, and that the “common core” I am pointing to is something I have manufactured by sanding off the differences. This is a real debate among serious people, and I will not pretend it is settled. But I think the constructivists prove less than they claim. That expectation shapes experience is certainly true—it shapes ordinary perception too, and yet we do not conclude there is no shared world out there to perceive. And the convergence is most striking precisely where it is *least* expected: when mystics report experiences that contradict their own training, that get them condemned by their own institutions, that they clearly did not go looking for and would have preferred not to find. Eckhart did not want to be a heretic. Al-Hallaj did not seek execution. When the experience overrides the expectation rather than confirming it, the constructivist explanation gets much weaker, and the simplest reading—that they ran into something real that their doctrine could not contain—gets much stronger.

So I am not asking you to believe that all religions are secretly the same, which is false and a little insulting to all of them. The differences are precious and they are not going away. I am asking you to notice something more

modest and more interesting: that beneath the genuine and irreducible diversity of the world's spiritual doctrines, there runs a thin, persistent, cross-cultural agreement about what is found when a human being looks all the way in—and that this agreement is exactly what we would expect if the looking were contacting something real. The traditions part ways describing it. They meet at the place where the describing begins.

12. The Finger and the Moon

If all this is right—if the truth of our interconnection is woven into nature, recoverable from within, and independently witnessed by every tradition on earth—then we are left with the most painful question in the book, the one that the entire second half exists to answer. *Why is the world like this?* Why, if we all already know, do we live as though we were strangers fighting over scraps? Why has three thousand years of consistent testimony from our wisest people changed the daily behavior of our species so little?

Part of the answer is biological, and it is the subject of the next part. But part of the answer lives right here, inside spirit itself, and we have to face it before we move on: the very traditions that carried this insight have also, with grim reliability, buried it. And the mechanism by which they buried it is worth understanding precisely, because it is the same mechanism that will reappear when we get to politics, and to language, and to the whole problem of how living truth turns into dead words.

There is an old image for it, from Zen: *the finger pointing at the moon is not the moon*. A teacher has a direct experience of the connected whole. They try to convey it—but the experience itself cannot be handed over, so they point: with a word, a metaphor, a story, a ritual. *Look there*. The students, who have the pointing but not yet the seeing, do the most natural and most catastrophic thing in the world. They study the finger. They memorize its exact angle. They write books about the finger, found institutions to preserve the finger, declare other people's fingers heretical. And the moon—the thing the finger was *for*—goes unattended, then forgotten, then finally denied by the very people who have made a religion of the hand.

Every tradition knows this happens, and warns against it in its own voice. The Taoists say it in the first line of the Tao Te Ching: the Tao that can be spoken is not the eternal Tao. The Sufis distinguish the *zahir*, the outer husk, from the *batin*, the living kernel. Even Paul, no mystic by temperament, warns that “the letter kills, but the spirit gives life.” The recognition that a tradition's own forms can betray its own heart is built into the traditions themselves. And yet the betrayal happens anyway, over and over, because of something we will examine at length later: institutions serve their own survival, and a living insight that lets anyone reach the truth directly—with no priest, no hierarchy, no membership dues—is the single most dangerous thing a

religious institution can contain. So the experience gets translated into doctrine, the doctrine into a test, the test into a weapon. The thing that began as *you are not separate from anything; there is nothing finally to fear* hardens, across centuries, into *you are separated from God by your sin, and only we can mediate the repair*. That is not a softer version of the original teaching. It is its exact inversion. The cure has been relabeled as the disease.

I am not telling you this to attack religion, and I want to be careful here, because it would be easy to hear contempt where I intend something closer to grief. The traditions are precious. They are the libraries in which this insight was kept alive at all, often by heroic people, through dark centuries when nothing else would carry it. The mystics I quoted in the last chapter were almost all devout members of their faiths. The point is not that religion is the enemy of spirit. The point is subtler and sadder: that the same human tendency which takes a living truth and freezes it into a controllable object is at work everywhere, and that it has repeatedly captured even our holiest things. Keep that mechanism in mind. We are going to watch it operate, in the chapters ahead, not just on God but on words, on nations, on the truth itself.

But notice, finally, the one hopeful thing buried in all of this. The reason the insight keeps coming back—the reason it could be persecuted in one century and rediscovered in the next, suppressed in one culture and spontaneously voiced in another—is that it was never really dependent on the institutions in the first place. It is not a doctrine that has to be transmitted or it dies. It is a recognition, written into the structure of reality and into the structure of any mind clear enough to look. You can burn every book and the next person who sits quietly under the stars, or holds a dying parent, or watches a forest, can find it again from scratch. That is the deepest reason for hope in this entire book: the truth we most need is not stored in any vault that can be locked. It is stored in what we are.

Which brings us to the hard turn. Because if the knowledge is this available, this innate, this stubbornly recurrent—then our failure to live by it cannot be explained by ignorance. We are not failing to be good because no one ever told us how. We have been told, by everyone, for thirty centuries. Something else is in the way. Something older than the sages, built into us before the words. To understand it, we have to come down from the mountain of spirit and look honestly at the animal that climbed it.

PART THREE

SCARCITY

*How an animal built for not-enough came to live
in a universe of more-than-enough—and why that
contradiction is the root of nearly everything that
hurts*

Man is the only creature who refuses to be what he is.
— Albert Camus, *The Rebel* (1951)

We now arrive at the hinge of the whole book—the place where the soaring first half meets the ground, hard.

Everything in the last two parts pointed in one direction: reality is infinite, it leaves nothing out, it is alive and woven together, and some part of us knows this. If that is true, then the universe is not scarce. There is no cosmic shortage of being, no rationing of existence, no ledger running dry. Infinity, by definition, is not stingy. There is, at the deepest level, *enough*—enough being, enough connection, enough room.

And yet. Look at us. Look at the species that produced the argument you just read. We hoard. We compete. We build walls and armies. We let some people starve while others pile up wealth they could not spend in a thousand lifetimes. We know—in our clearest moments we absolutely know—that cooperation beats conflict, that generosity makes more than greed, that another's suffering is somehow our own. We teach this to our children. We carve it over the doors of our temples. And then we walk outside and do the opposite.

This part is about that contradiction, and I am going to argue something strong about it: that this single mismatch—an animal built for scarcity, living in an infinite reality, unable to feel it—is the deepest root of human suffering and very nearly every human problem. Not sin in the old sense of a stain on the soul. Not a curse, not a fall from grace, not a flaw in our character that better willpower could fix. Something both more innocent and more intractable than any of those: a design feature, working exactly as designed, in an environment it was never designed for.

The Buddha said that life is suffering, and that suffering has a cause, and that the cause can be understood. I think he was pointing at this. We are

going to spend this part understanding it—first the architecture, then how it plays out in our private lives and our public catastrophes, then why simply knowing better has never once been enough, and finally the strangest part of all: the tiny, airless world we have built inside the infinite one, and then mistaken for the whole of reality.

13. The Infinite and the Animal

Consider the creature reading this sentence.

You can follow an argument that concludes the universe is infinite and contains everything. You can entertain eternity. And you are also an organism that needs roughly two thousand calories today or you weaken, that will die without water in a matter of days, that requires a narrow band of temperature and a steady supply of oxygen and will perish, quickly, outside any of them. You share a finite planet with eight billion others of your kind and uncountable other living things, all drawing on the same limited stock of arable land and fresh water and breathable air. And you are the product of a process—evolution by natural selection—that spent four billion years ruthlessly favoring whatever organism grabbed resources a little better than its neighbor.

This is the central paradox of being human, and I want to state it as sharply as I can: *the creature that can perceive infinity is built for scarcity*. The mind that deduces that everything exists is bolted to a body that will panic without lunch. The consciousness capable of recognizing that all things are one rides on top of a nervous system finely tuned to treat other things—including other people—as threats and competitors first, and kin second.

It is tempting to read this as a failure—of intelligence, of character, of will. It is not. It is a design specification. Evolution did not build you to see reality accurately. That was never the goal, and evolution has no goals anyway; it has only outcomes. What survived and reproduced in the world that made us was not the organism with the truest picture of the cosmos but the one that found food, avoided becoming food, outmaneuvered rivals, and protected its young. Accuracy about the deep structure of reality was simply never selected for, because nothing about your reproductive success in the Pleistocene depended on whether you grasped that the universe is infinite. That you *can* grasp it is, in a sense, an accident—a spare capacity thrown off by the same overgrown brain that evolved to track social alliances and plan ambushes and model the weather. The ability to do metaphysics is a byproduct of the machinery for staying alive. We are animals who, almost by mistake, became able to see past our own animality—and then discovered we could not act on what we saw.

That is the wound the rest of this book is trying to dress. Not a moral failing to be scolded out of us. A structural fact to be understood, and then, with enormous patience, worked with.

14. The Evolution of Not-Enough

To see why the scarcity instinct is so deep—why it cannot simply be educated away, or meditated away, or voted away—we have to look at how thoroughly it is built into us. It is not a thin coat of fear over an otherwise rational mind. It is the foundation, poured first, that the rest was built on top of.

Start with a peculiar asymmetry that runs through nearly all of human psychology: losses hurt more than equivalent gains feel good. The psychologists Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky measured this with great precision—the pain of losing a hundred dollars is roughly twice as intense as the pleasure of gaining a hundred. On its face this is irrational; a rational calculator would weigh them equally. But it is not a flaw. It is a superbly adaptive feature, once you remember the world it was built for. In an environment where losing your food store meant death and gaining a little extra meant only mild comfort, the organism that *overweighted* losses outlived the one that treated gains and losses evenly. Fear of loss kept your ancestors alive. You inherited the fear. You feel it every time a small setback ruins your whole day while an equal stroke of luck barely registers.

Go deeper, to the alarm system itself. Your amygdala—the brain's threat detector—processes danger and triggers your body's response *before* the slower, rational prefrontal cortex has finished evaluating the situation. You flinch before you decide to flinch. You feel afraid before you have judged whether fear makes sense. This, too, is not a bug; it is hundreds of millions of years of refinement. The early human who paused to calmly assess whether that rustle in the grass was wind or a leopard, on average, got eaten by the leopard. The one who assumed leopard and ran sometimes wasted energy fleeing from wind—but survived every actual leopard. We are all descended from the ones who ran. Their hair-trigger is our hair-trigger.

Now the move that makes the whole thing tragic. That threat system does not stay confined to physical danger. Brain imaging shows that social rejection activates much the same circuitry as physical pain—the brain processes being excluded using machinery built for processing a wound. Why? Because for almost the entire span of human evolution, social exclusion *was* a death sentence. A human alone on the savanna was a dead human. The band of fifty to a hundred and fifty people—roughly the number the

anthropologist Robin Dunbar found our brains are wired to track—was the whole of safety, food-sharing, and protection. To be cast out was to be killed slowly. So our brains never learned to distinguish a social threat from a mortal one, because for our ancestors they were the same thing.

Follow that one step further and you arrive at the engine of an astonishing amount of human misery. If exclusion registers as mortal danger, then *status*—your standing in the group, your safety from being cast out—becomes a survival resource as precious as food. And so we pursue it with the same ferocity. People will sacrifice money, comfort, health, and relationships for a larger office or a more impressive address. They will bankrupt themselves for prestige, work themselves sick for a title, and end friendships over a perceived slight to their rank. The scarcity instinct, evolved to guard a winter's store of calories, has been quietly generalized to a currency—status—that is in principle unlimited but is experienced as desperately, achingly finite. There is, the old voice insists, only so much respect to go around, and someone else having more means you have less.



All of this hardware was assembled in a specific place and time. The human brain reached roughly its current form somewhere between two and three hundred thousand years ago, on the African savanna and its margins: a world of seasonal hunger, unpredictable rain, large predators, rival bands, and the ever-present possibility that a bad month would be your last. In that world, scarcity was not a belief or an ideology. It was a fact, and the psychology of scarcity was not a distortion of reality—it was an accurate map of it. A failed hunt meant going hungry. An injury that kept you from foraging meant depending on others whose own supplies were thin. The voice that said *get yours, watch them, there might not be enough* was, for almost the entire history of our kind, simply *correct*.

Here is the whole problem of modern life in one sentence: the map is still running, but the territory has changed.

The brain shaped by the savanna now operates a life of historically unimaginable abundance. An ordinary middle-class person in a developed country today has access to more calories, more comfort, more medicine, more information, and more physical safety than the wealthiest emperor of the ancient world. The pantry is full. The neighborhood is safe. There is, by any honest accounting, enough. And still the old voice runs underneath

everything, undiminished: *not enough. Watch out. Get yours before they take it.* The amygdala still scans the safe room for predators. The loss-aversion still turns every minor reversal into a small emergency. The status-hunger still gnaws, no matter how much respect is actually on hand. We are running Pleistocene survival software on a world it was never written for, and most of our suffering is the error messages.

And it is not only an individual inheritance. It is a tribal one, and this is the part with the highest body count. We evolved in small groups that competed with other small groups for territory and resources, and our remarkable capacity for cooperation evolved largely *as a weapon for that competition.* We band together with *us* in order to prevail against *them.* Deep loyalty inside the group and ready hostility toward outsiders are not a contradiction in this design—they are two halves of the same adaptation. Which is why the switch from warm cooperation to cold aggression requires no change in circumstances at all. It requires only a change in *categorization.* Relabel a neighbor as one of “them” and the entire machinery of threat and competition swings into action in an instant.

The psychologist Henri Tajfel showed just how little it takes. Sort people into groups on the most trivial, arbitrary basis imaginable—a coin flip, a stated preference for one painter over another—and they will immediately begin favoring their own group and shortchanging the other, even when there is nothing to gain and they will never meet the people involved. The tribal instinct does not need real tribes. It needs only the *perception* of a line, and human beings are gloriously, dangerously inventive at drawing lines: race, religion, nationality, party, dialect, the team on the jersey. The content of the line is almost irrelevant. What matters is that once a line exists, the ancient program activates on cue: us and them, threat and scarcity, ours to defend and theirs to deny.

This is why building a civilization is so hard, and why every civilization is so fragile. Civilization just *is* the project of extending the circle of cooperation past the band of a hundred and fifty—to the village, the city, the nation, and ultimately to all eight billion of us and the living world besides. And every single extension runs directly against the grain of the instinct. The old voice keeps whispering: *they are not us. They will take what is ours. There is not enough.* And the whisper is persuasive for the worst possible reason—because for almost all of our history, it was true.

15. The Personal War

It would be comforting to think the scarcity instinct confines itself to the grand stage—to nations and armies, the stuff of history books. It does not. It runs the kitchen and the bedroom and the group chat with exactly the same machinery. The scale changes; the mechanism does not. And we have to look at the small theater first, because it is where you actually live, and because once you can see the program running in your own relationships you can never again pretend it is only other people's problem.

Take the most intimate bond two people can form. Two partners who love each other, who chose each other, who pool their money and their shelter and their future. And what do they fight about, over and over, with an intensity that would look insane to a Martian? The same three things nations go to war over: resources (money, time, who does the dishes and the laundry and the invisible labor of remembering), status (whose career bends for whose, who decides, whose needs quietly come first), and territory (space, autonomy, the right to be left alone). A couple can have a screaming fight about a sink full of dishes, and if you think the fight is about dishes you will never understand it. The dishes are never the issue. Underneath is always the older question, the savanna question: *Am I safe here? Am I valued? Will there be enough—enough love, enough attention, enough respect—for me?* The scarcity instinct cannot tell the difference between a raid on the food store and a threat to your sense of being loved. It throws the same alarm for both.

The office runs the same program in business casual. Office politics—the maneuvering for promotion, the quiet hoarding of information, the alliances and factions, the credit quietly stolen—is Pleistocene tribal competition with a dress code. And notice, again, how wildly out of proportion the emotion is to the stakes. People will torch a working relationship over a performance review that differs by a single point. They will nurse a grudge for a decade over a promotion that went to someone else. The actual prize—a title, a slightly larger desk, a manager's nod—cannot possibly justify the intensity. But the instinct does not see a title. It sees rank in the band, and rank in the band once meant survival, and so it fights for the corner office as if its life depended on it, because once, the thing the corner office stands in for genuinely did.

Even friendship, the most voluntary and generous of our bonds, is not safe from it. Friendships fracture over what are, examined coldly, misallocations of a single scarce resource: attention. *She spent the whole night talking to someone else. He didn't text on my birthday. They were invited and I wasn't.* The hurt is real. The jealousy is real. And it is, strictly speaking, irrational, because attention and affection are not finite the way a haunch of meat is finite—your friend loving someone else does not use up the love available to you. But the brain does not believe this, because the brain was built in a world where every relationship really was a survival calculation, where the loss of an ally could mean the loss of protection and food and, in the end, your life.



There is one more form the personal war takes, and it is the most insidious of all, because in this one there is no opponent at all. There is only you, and a treadmill.

Psychologists call it hedonic adaptation, and the finding is one of the most robust and most quietly devastating in all of the science of happiness. Whatever happens to you, good or bad, you tend to return, after a while, to roughly your baseline level of contentment. Win the lottery and you will be euphoric for some months—and then, astonishingly, drift back to about where you started. Suffer a serious accident and you will be wretched for a time—and then, also astonishingly, recover much further than you would ever believe in advance. The set point reasserts itself. The treadmill carries you back.

Why would a mind be built this way? Because a mind that could feel *satisfied*—truly, lastingly satisfied—would, in the brutal logic of natural selection, have been a liability. A satisfied animal stops striving: stops foraging, stops competing, stops climbing. It gets outcompeted by the animal that can never quite get comfortable, the one for whom every gain instantly becomes the new normal and the baseline from which the next hunger is measured. So evolution built us to want, not to have. The brain treats every achievement as a fresh starting line. You wanted the promotion; you got it; now you want the next rung. You wanted the house; you got it; now the house is too small. You wanted *enough* money to relax; you have it; and “enough” has quietly redefined itself upward while you weren't looking, and now you need more.

This is the scarcity instinct operating at the most private level imaginable: the structural inability to feel that you have enough—not because you don't, but because the mind is built to keep moving the line. The brain manufactures the sense of not-enough continuously, automatically, the way the liver makes bile, regardless of the actual contents of your life. A person can possess more than ninety-nine percent of every human who has ever lived and still feel the lack, sharp and genuine, because the lack was never really about the contents. It is a setting, not a measurement. An organism that could sit back and feel that it had enough would, in the world that made us, have been replaced long ago by one that never could. We are the descendants of the ones who never could. That is why you can have so much and feel so poor.

16. The Global War

Now scale the personal war up to the level of nations, and watch the pattern stay exactly the same—only the death toll changes.

The history of human civilization, viewed from far enough away, is largely the history of groups competing for things they perceived as scarce: land, water, minerals, trade routes, labor, position. Nearly every empire in the record was built by acquiring resources that belonged to someone else. Nearly every war, beneath whatever ideals were printed on the banners, was a fight over something believed to be in short supply. The Peloponnesian War turned on control of trade and tribute. Rome's conquests ran on grain, slaves, and taxable land. The colonial empires were organized, explicitly, around extraction—gold, silver, spices, rubber, cotton, oil—from conquered peoples. The two World Wars, under their ideological surfaces, were contests for territory, industrial capacity, and raw materials. The Cold War was a struggle for influence over resource-rich regions. And the wars of our own century—in the Gulf, in the eastern Mediterranean, around contested seas—are fought over oil and gas and shipping lanes.

The consistency is so total it amounts to a law of human affairs: wherever something is perceived as scarce and valuable, violence will eventually organize itself around getting it. The form evolves—from a raiding party to a legion to a drone—but the underlying logic never does. *There is something we need. They have it. We will take it.* The Pleistocene band fighting over a waterhole and the industrial nation fighting over a petroleum field are running the identical program, through the identical neural machinery, producing the identical conviction that there is not enough and that survival depends on seizing more.

The paradox of abundance

Here is where the story gets genuinely strange, and where the gap between reality and instinct becomes impossible to ignore. The resource warfare continues *even after the scarcity has been solved*.

The twentieth century proved, beyond any reasonable doubt, that human productive capacity is more than sufficient to feed, clothe, shelter, and provide basic medicine to every person alive. Norman Borlaug's Green Revolution multiplied global food production past what anyone had thought

possible; whatever its ecological costs, it turned caloric scarcity from a problem of *production* into a problem of *distribution*. There is enough food. There has been enough food for decades. And still, hundreds of millions of people go chronically hungry—not because the food does not exist, but because the systems that move it are organized around competition rather than need.

The same holds for nearly every basic good. There is more than enough fresh water on Earth to supply every person many times over—and it is hoarded, polluted, and privatized. There is enough material to house every family—and housing is treated as an investment vehicle to be accumulated rather than a necessity to be met. There is enough medical knowledge to prevent millions of deaths a year—and patents and market incentives route the treatments to the profitable before the desperate. The scarcity, in case after case, is *manufactured*: an artifact of a distribution system that is itself an artifact of the scarcity psychology that built it. We have automated our oldest fear into our institutions, and then pointed at the results as proof that the world is harsh.

This is the paradox of abundance, and it is fractal—it shows up at every scale. Human ingenuity is powerful enough to solve almost any specific scarcity, and human psychology guarantees that each solution breeds a new one. We solved the scarcity of calories and invented the scarcity of *nutrition*, surrounded by food that is slowly killing us. We solved the scarcity of information and invented the scarcity of *attention*, drowning in facts and starving for understanding. We solved the scarcity of communication and invented the scarcity of *genuine connection*, more contactable and more lonely than any humans who have ever lived. The hedonic treadmill that runs in the individual runs in the civilization too. We are, collectively, a machine for converting real abundance into perceived scarcity, and we run it day and night.

The technological treadmill

Nowhere is this clearer than in technology, which we tell ourselves is the very thing that will save us from scarcity. Every major innovation in our history was driven, at least partly, by the promise of solving some shortage—and every one of them delivered, and every one of them spawned a fresh shortage that demanded the next invention.

Agriculture solved the scarcity of food—and created the scarcity of arable land, which drove territorial war on a scale nomads had never imagined. Writing solved the scarcity of memory—and created the scarcity of literacy, a new axis of class and control. The printing press solved the scarcity of books—and helped ignite the scarcity of agreed-upon truth, feeding centuries of religious and ideological war. The steam engine solved the scarcity of power—and created the scarcity of coal, then oil, then rare earths, each new fuel a new arena of conflict. The internet solved the scarcity of information—and created the scarcity of attention, trust, and truth, as the flood of available content made it harder, not easier, to know what is real.

The optimist looks at this sequence and sees progress, and is not wrong: each cycle does leave us materially better off, and the problems of abundance really are preferable to the problems of starvation. Obesity is a kinder problem than famine. Information overload is a kinder problem than ignorance. But the scarcity instinct does not do this comparison. It does not weigh this century against the last. It compares *this moment to the moment just before*, and in that comparison there is always a new thing wanted and not yet had. The objective conditions improve across centuries; the subjective experience of lack stays roughly constant, because lack is what the machinery produces no matter what you feed it.

Hold the most extreme example in your hand: the smartphone. A device more powerful than the computers that flew humans to the moon, carried by billions, putting the accumulated knowledge of the species and instant contact with almost anyone on Earth into a pocket. By any historical standard it is indistinguishable from magic, a thing that would have seemed like sorcery to every human who lived before about 1990. And within a few years of its arrival, the dominant *feeling* attached to it was anxiety: about notifications, about comparison, about being perpetually reachable, about missing out, about the next model making this one obsolete. The device that resolved a hundred old scarcities manufactured a hundred new ones, and net, for many people, made the felt sense of not-enough *worse*. That is not a failure of the technology. That is the brain, working exactly as built, doing to a miracle what it does to everything.

17. The Economy of Fear

I want to pause on one institution in particular, because it is the one most of us spend most of our waking lives inside, and because it is the scarcity instinct made into infrastructure. I mean the economy—money, markets, the whole machinery by which we produce and exchange and accumulate.

Let me say the fair thing first, because it is true and it is easy to forget when one is about to be critical. The market is one of humanity's most astonishing cooperative achievements, every bit as miraculous as the political order we praised earlier. No one person knows how to make a pencil—not really; the wood, the graphite, the metal, the paint, the global web of miners and loggers and shippers and factories required to put one in your hand exceeds any single mind's grasp. And yet there is a pencil, cheap, on every desk, produced by millions of strangers who never met and never coordinated, each pursuing their own small purposes, knit together by prices into something that functions like a single vast intelligence. Markets let strangers cooperate at a scale and subtlety that no central planner has ever matched. They have lifted more people out of material misery than any other human invention. This is not nothing. This is, in its way, the cooperation instinct of Part Two operating through the medium of self-interest, and it deserves real respect.

And yet. Look at what money actually *is*, underneath. A price is, at its core, a measure of scarcity—the rarer and more wanted a thing, the more it costs. The entire system runs on, and continuously broadcasts, the signal *not enough*. It is the scarcity instinct crystallized into a technology, given its own logic and momentum, and then installed as the operating system of the whole human world. We did not just inherit the feeling of not-enough from the savanna; we built a global machine that generates that feeling on purpose, all day, and calls it the economy. The machine is extraordinarily good at producing and distributing things. It is also, by its very design, incapable of ever saying *enough*. Growth must continue. The number must go up. A company that merely sustains itself, meeting real needs and then stopping, content, is regarded as a failure. We have taken the one feature of the brain we diagnosed as the deepest source of our suffering—the inability to feel that there is enough—and we have made it the law of our collective life, the thing we organize civilization to maximize.

This is the hedonic treadmill and the technological treadmill from the earlier chapters, now poured into concrete and wired into every screen. The advertisement is its purest expression: an industry, employing some of the most creative people alive and a substantial fraction of the world's wealth, devoted entirely to manufacturing the feeling of lack—to ensuring that you look at your perfectly adequate life and feel, freshly, that something is missing, that the gap can be closed by a purchase, that you are not yet enough and do not yet have enough. Trillions of dollars and the best minds of several generations, aimed at keeping eight billion people from ever feeling that they have arrived. It is the scarcity instinct, externalized, automated, and sold back to us at a markup. No wonder we are exhausted. We have built an environment that triggers the ancient alarm deliberately, for profit, without pause.



I am not making the argument that we should tear it all down, and I want to be clear about that, because the failure mode here is as old as the complaint. Every attempt to simply abolish the market and replace it with enforced sharing has run headlong into the lesson of the last chapter: the institution built to transcend the scarcity instinct gets captured by it, and the commune grows its hierarchy and the planned economy grows its commissars and its breadlines. The instinct does not vanish when you outlaw money; it just finds another currency—political power, party rank—and pursues it with the same ferocity, now without even the market's saving grace of having to satisfy a customer. The point is not that markets are evil and sharing is holy. The point is the same point this whole book keeps making: the trouble is not the tool but our *relationship* to it, our having mistaken the small world's operating system for reality itself.

Because here is what the economy of fear cannot see, by construction: that the deepest goods are not scarce at all. Love is not depleted by being given; you do not have less of it for loving more. Understanding is not used up when shared; teaching someone leaves you no poorer. Beauty, meaning, attention freely given, the sense of being at home in your own life—none of these obey the logic of price, because none of them are scarce in the way a barrel of oil is scarce. They belong to the infinite world, not the small one. And an economy that can only measure and reward the scarce will systematically starve the abundant—will build a civilization fabulously rich in things and desperately

poor in exactly the goods that make a life worth living. We end up, as so many do, materially wealthier than any humans in history and quietly certain that something essential has gone missing. It has. We have spent our one life inside a machine optimized for the one kind of value that can never satisfy us, and we have called the emptiness it produces a personal failing rather than the predictable output of the system.

The way out is not to escape the economy—you cannot, and the attempt is its own trap. It is to demote it: to use it as the tool it is, brilliant for what it is good at, while refusing to let it set the terms of your soul. To keep one eye always on the abundant goods it cannot price, and to spend your real attention there. To notice, when the manufactured lack comes for you, that it is manufactured—an old alarm, deliberately triggered, running in a world that is not actually short of anything that matters. That noticing is small. It is also, as we are about to see, the hardest thing in the world to do, because knowing this and living it turn out to be two entirely different things.

18. Knowing and Not Doing

We have now seen the scarcity instinct at work from the marriage bed to the battlefield. But I have been circling the cruelest part of the whole predicament, and it is time to name it directly. The deepest tragedy is not that we live in scarcity. It is that *we know we don't have to, and we do it anyway.*

I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.

— Paul the Apostle, *Romans 7:19* (c. 57 CE)

Paul's confession in his letter to the Romans is usually read as theology, a lament about sin. I think it is something more precise: it is the single most accurate sentence ever written about the human condition. *I know what is good. I want to do it. I do the other thing instead.* Every civilization has produced sages who saw the truth clearly and said it plainly—the Buddha, Confucius, Jesus, the Stoics, the Enlightenment philosophers all taught that cooperation beats competition, that generosity creates more than hoarding, that the wall between self and other is thinner than it looks. Modern game theory even proved it with mathematics: in repeated interactions, cooperative strategies reliably outperform aggressive ones—Robert Axelrod's famous tournaments showed that simple reciprocal cooperation, "tit for tat," beats ruthlessness over time. We know. We have always known. And the knowing changes almost nothing.

The reason is now, I hope, coming into focus, because we have spent this whole part building it. The knowledge lives in one part of the brain, and the behavior is driven by another, and in any real contest the second part wins. The prefrontal cortex—the seat of reasoning, planning, moral reflection—understands perfectly well that cooperation is optimal. The amygdala—the seat of threat and fear—does not care in the slightest what the prefrontal cortex understands. The prefrontal cortex works in long horizons, abstract principles, aggregate outcomes. The amygdala works in *now*, in concrete threats, in survival. And when the two conflict—especially under stress, fatigue, fear, or the perception of threat—the amygdala wins. Not always, not in every person in every moment, but reliably, predictably, the way the house wins. The moral knowledge sits in the prefrontal cortex like a memo on a desk that nobody reads when the fire alarm is going off.

This is why moral education alone has never been enough to remake human behavior, and why it never will be. Teaching someone that all people are equal does not disable the categorizing machinery that sorts strangers into us and them in milliseconds. Teaching someone that greed is corrosive does not reprogram the dopamine circuits that light up when status is won or wealth is piled. Teaching someone that the rustle in the grass is probably just wind does not stop them from flinching. You cannot lecture an instinct out of existence. The sermon, however true, is filed in the one room of the house that goes dark the instant the alarm rings.



If individuals cannot think their way past the instinct, perhaps institutions can. This was the great hope of the Enlightenment—that the right structures, rather than the right sermons, could channel our scarcity psychology into something livable: democracy to manage the contest for power, markets to harness self-interest toward production, the rule of law to restrain the strong, human rights to widen the circle of concern past the tribe. And the hope was not naïve. These structures genuinely work, imperfectly and partially. Democracies do fight each other less. Markets did produce unprecedented abundance. Law does constrain some of power’s worst appetites. Rights frameworks did extend moral concern further than any tribe ever managed on its own.

But institutions are built and run by animals carrying the very instinct they are meant to contain, and so the instinct seeps into them and bends them back toward itself. Democratic politics curdles into partisan warfare, each election treated as an existential, zero-sum fight for survival. Markets maximize aggregate wealth and then distribute it by power rather than need, so that the same city holds both billionaires and people sleeping in the cold. Law gets applied unequally, shielding the strong and gripping the weak. Rights get proclaimed universally and enforced selectively, extended to allies and denied to enemies. The institutions hold back the worst of the instinct, which is no small thing—but they cannot transcend it, because it is in the people who run them.

And the most sobering pattern of all is what happens to the institutions explicitly built to rise above scarcity. The monastery, founded in poverty, accumulates wealth. The commune, founded in equality, grows a hierarchy. The church, founded on love, becomes an empire. The revolution, fought for

the people, hardens into a new ruling class. It is so consistent it begins to look like a law: *every institution created to transcend the scarcity instinct is eventually captured by it*. The instinct is older and deeper than any structure we can build against it. It is the water we swim in, invisible precisely because it is everywhere.

There is a final irony here, and it is worth sitting with, because it complicates any simple optimism about progress. The very faculty that lets us perceive the infinite—imagination, creativity, abstraction—is also the faculty that *generates new scarcities*. No other animal invents needs. A lion does not lie awake wishing for a faster antelope; a bird does not look at its perfectly good nest and covet a better one. But we do this constantly. We imagine things that do not exist—technologies, luxuries, status markers, experiences—and then we feel their absence as genuine deprivation. No one suffered from the lack of a smartphone in 1985. Now its absence for an afternoon produces real anxiety in billions of people. The scarcity is completely real as an experience and completely manufactured as a fact. Our creativity is, among its glories, an engine of artificial want: every invention mints a new class of haves and have-nots, every solution opens a new front of competition. The same mind that can conceive a world beyond scarcity invents fresh scarcities faster than it resolves the old ones. This is not an argument against creativity, which has made our lives immeasurably better by every material measure. It is an observation about a marriage we cannot annul: creativity generates the possibilities, and the scarcity instinct converts them into needs, and together they produce the restless, magnificent, never-satisfied thing that is human civilization.

19. The Small World We Made

I want to end this part by naming the trap as precisely as I can, because everything in the second half of the book depends on seeing it clearly. The trap is not simply that we are greedy, or fearful, or tribal. The trap is that we have used these instincts to build an entire *world*—and then we have moved into it and forgotten there is anything else.

Think about what actually occupies your mind on an ordinary day. Money. Your job title and how it compares to others'. The news, and which side is winning. What someone said about you. Your follower count, your credit score, your reputation, your nation, your team, your brand. Notice that not one of these things exists in nature. There is no money in the atoms. There is no nationality in the cells. Status, law, money, borders, reputation, the whole roaring content of the daily mind—these are things we made up, together, and agreed to treat as real. Philosophers and historians have a name for this layer: the *intersubjective* world. It is real in the only way it can be—real because we collectively believe in it, the way the rules of a game are real while you are playing. A hundred-dollar bill has value because everyone agrees it does; stop agreeing and it becomes a slip of paper. A border is a line that exists because enough people will fight over it. This shared, invented layer is one of our species' supreme achievements. It is how eight billion strangers cooperate at all. It is also, I want to suggest, the small room we have locked ourselves inside.

Because here is what happens. The scarcity instinct, applied to this invented world, treats every one of its imaginary tokens as if it were food on the savanna. It makes us hungry for money the way our ancestors were hungry for calories, terrified of low status the way they were terrified of exile, ready to kill over a flag the way they once fought over a waterhole. And the tokens, unlike calories, are *infinite in principle and experienced as desperately finite*—so the hunger can never be satisfied, only fed. We have taken the most powerful survival drives ever produced by evolution and aimed them at a world of pure symbol, where they can never be turned off because the symbols never run out and never fill us up. We are starving inside a structure made of things that cannot nourish, because they were never food.

This is what I mean by the small world. Not that human meaning is bad—it is most of what makes life worth living. But that we have collapsed our

entire sense of reality down into this one constructed layer, and lost contact with the vast reality it floats in. We live as if the game were the world. We suffer as if losing the game were dying. And almost every sin of that small world—the cruelty, the contempt, the endless grinding war of all against all over tokens that mean nothing outside the game—comes from this one error: mistaking the human-made world for the whole of what is. The Buddha called the root of suffering by various names—craving, grasping, the illusion of a separate self. I think they all point here, to this: a creature of the infinite, living its one life entirely inside a tiny room of its own construction, fighting to the death over the furniture.

If that is the disease, then the shape of the cure is already visible, even though we will spend the rest of the book learning to administer it. The cure is not to destroy the small world—we need it; cooperation at scale requires it; you cannot run a hospital or a power grid without money and law and shared agreements. The cure is to stop *mistaking it for everything*. It is to expand our sense of our own being back out past the walls of the intersubjective room—to remember, regularly and bodily, the infinite, living, interconnected reality of the first two parts, the reality we never actually left, the one in which there genuinely *is* enough. From inside the small room, every other person is a competitor for scarce tokens. From outside it—from the standpoint of nature, of spirit, of what is actually the case—every other person is another face of the one thing you also are. Nothing about the room changes. But everything about how you move through it does.

This is the hinge the whole book turns on, so let me set it down as plainly as I can before we go on. We are not bad. We are *mismatched*—infinite beings running scarcity software, magnificent animals who built a world of symbols and then got trapped inside it. The suffering is real, and the instinct that causes it cannot be deleted; it is part of what we are, and any honest path forward has to begin by admitting that. But the instinct can be *seen*. It can be named in the moment it fires. And the larger truth it blinds us to has not gone anywhere—it is as available now as it was to the first person who ever looked up and felt the sky. The rest of this book is about what becomes possible once we hold both at once: the animal and the infinite, the small world and the whole. It turns out that this is exactly where ethics begins—not in the heaven of pure principle, and not in the mud of pure instinct, but in the narrow, difficult, luminous place where the two meet, and a real human being has to actually decide what to do.

PART FOUR

ETHICS

Whether a way to live can be drawn from an infinite world—and how, by holding two worldviews at once, it can

A human being is part of the whole called by us “Universe,” a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separated from the rest—a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness.

— Albert Einstein, letter of condolence (1950)

We have arrived at the question this whole book was written to answer. We have a picture of reality—infinite, connected, alive, enough—and we have an honest account of ourselves—animals built for scarcity, trapped in a small world of our own making. So: how should we live? Not how should an enlightened being live in a perfected world, but how should *you*, the actual mismatched creature reading this, decide what to do tomorrow morning when the alarm goes off and the old voice starts whispering?

This is harder than it sounds, and I want to begin by admitting the strongest objection to everything I am about to say, because if I can't answer it the rest collapses. The objection is this: *you can't get an “ought” from an infinite “is.”* If everything exists—if every possible configuration is equally real, the kindness and the cruelty, the saint and the torturer all somewhere actual—then doesn't the whole moral floor drop out? If nothing is excluded, nothing is forbidden. If all things are one, then what does it matter what the one does to itself? It can look, at first, as though the vision of Part One doesn't *ground* ethics but *dissolves* it—as though “everything is connected and everything is permitted” were the same sentence.

I think this objection is wrong, and showing why is the work of this part. But it is not wrong in a stupid way, and the answer is not a clever trick. The answer is that ethics has never come from a single worldview, and the people who tried to build it from one—whether the cold worldview of the animal or the warm worldview of the mystic—have always failed in the same predictable way. A livable ethics comes only from holding *both* at once. Let me build that case from the ground up, starting with why we needed ethics in the first place.

20. Why We Build Ethics

Ethics is not a luxury that comfortable societies invent once their stomachs are full. It is a survival technology, as old and as practical as the spear and the cooking fire. And once you see it that way, its whole history snaps into focus.

Go back to the trap of the last part. We are animals whose deepest drives were built for a small band and a scarce world, suddenly trying to live together in numbers—villages, then cities, then nations—that those drives were never designed for. The scarcity instinct, left to run unchecked, produces exactly what you would expect from eight billion threat-detectors competing over symbolic tokens: theft, betrayal, vendetta, war. Ethics is the name for every system humans have ever devised to *restrain that instinct enough to live together at all*. It is the software patch we keep writing for the Pleistocene hardware. Every commandment, every law, every code of honor, every social contract is, at bottom, an attempt to extend the circle of cooperation past the point where the instinct wants to stop, and to hold it there against the constant pull of *us versus them, get yours, there is not enough*.

Seen this way, the great moral systems of history stop being a museum of competing abstractions and become a series of brave, partial answers to one practical question: *how do we get this animal to treat that animal as kin?*

The oldest answer was divine command. Do not kill, do not steal, do not betray—because God says so, and God is watching, and God will punish. We should not be too quick to sneer at this. For most of human history it was the only thing strong enough to do the job. An instinct that ignores a philosophy lecture will sometimes still flinch before an all-seeing judge. Divine command outsourced the authority of ethics to a power greater than any chief, and thereby made promises enforceable between strangers who would never meet. Its weakness is equally plain, and we have already seen it: it grounds the good in obedience rather than understanding, so that when the authority is doubted—or captured, as we saw in Part Two, by an institution serving its own power—the whole moral structure built on it can come down at once. A goodness that exists only because someone is watching evaporates the moment you stop believing in the watcher.

The Greeks offered a different answer: virtue. Aristotle asked not “what rule must I obey?” but “what kind of person should I become?” The good life, he argued, is the life of a flourishing human being, and flourishing comes from cultivating stable excellences of character—courage, honesty, justice, temperance, practical wisdom—until acting well becomes second nature rather than constant struggle. This was a profound move, because it located ethics inside the person rather than in an external command, and because it understood that knowing the good is useless without the trained character to do it under pressure—a point we will need badly later. Its limit is that virtue ethics tells you to become wise and good but is famously thin on what to actually *do* when two virtues collide, or when good people of good character look at the same situation and see opposite duties.

The modern era, losing confidence in both God and inherited character, tried to rebuild ethics on reason alone, and produced two great rival systems that still structure most of our arguments. Kant sought a moral law that any rational being could derive without appeal to God or consequence: act only as you could will everyone to act; treat people always as ends in themselves, never merely as means. It is a noble and powerful idea—it is the deep root of the modern language of human rights and human dignity—but it can grind into absurdity when its absolute rules collide with reality, famously insisting you must not lie even to the murderer at the door asking where your friend is hiding. And the utilitarians—Bentham, Mill—proposed instead that the right act is whatever produces the greatest well-being for the greatest number, turning ethics into a kind of arithmetic of happiness. This too is powerful; it is behind most of our public reasoning about policy and welfare. But it can justify monstrous things if the numbers happen to favor them, and it asks of us a godlike calculation—summing all the consequences for everyone forever—that no actual human being can perform. Alongside these ran the great political tradition of the social contract—Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau—which framed ethics and law as a bargain we strike to escape the war of all against all, trading some freedom for mutual safety. Which is to say: an explicit, formal treaty against the scarcity instinct.



Now step back and notice two things about this whole magnificent history.

The first is that every one of these systems is, in its way, *right*—each captures something real and indispensable. We genuinely do need restraint

backed by something larger than ourselves; we genuinely do need to cultivate good character; we genuinely should ask whether we could will our rule for everyone; we genuinely should weigh the consequences for all affected; we genuinely are bound by a contract of mutual restraint. A mature person uses all of them. You reach for consequences in one situation, duty in another, character in a third. They are tools, and the wise have always carried the whole kit.

The second thing is more troubling, and it is the thread that leads into the heart of this part. Every one of these systems was built almost entirely *inside the small world*. They take the separate, scarce, competing self as the basic unit of reality and then ask how to manage the friction between such selves. Divine command needs an external enforcer because it assumes we won't be good on our own. The social contract is a truce between combatants who would otherwise be at war. Even utilitarianism, summing up the separate happinesses of separate individuals, starts from the premise of separation and tries to add the fragments back together. They are all, in different ways, ingenious answers to the question *how do fundamentally separate beings live together?* And they work—partially, fitfully, the way the institutions of the last part work, holding back the worst while never quite transcending it.

But what if the founding premise is false? What if the separation they all begin from is, as Part One argued and Einstein said in the words above, “a kind of optical delusion of consciousness”? Then we have been doing ethics with one hand tied behind our backs—building ever more sophisticated treaties between selves whose separateness was never the deepest truth about them. We have an ethics for the scarce world. We are missing its other half. And the central claim of this part is that real ethics—livable, durable, honest ethics—only appears when we stop choosing between the two worlds and learn, finally, to stand in both.

21. The Two Worldviews

Here is the synthesis the whole book has been building toward, and I want to state it carefully because everything else depends on getting it right.

There are two true things about your situation, and they generate two complete, coherent, and opposite ways of seeing.

The first is the worldview of infinity. From here, the view of Parts One and Two, the truth is that everything exists, all is connected, separation is appearance, and there is fundamentally enough—enough being, enough love, nothing finally to fear, no real “other” anywhere to harm or be harmed by. This is not wishful thinking; we argued it from logic and watched physics and biology and three thousand years of contemplatives converge on it. It is, I believe, the deeper truth.

The second is the worldview of scarcity. From here, the view of Part Three, the truth is that you are a finite animal who will die without food, that resources on this planet really are limited, that other people really can hurt you, that the instinct really does fire, and that pretending otherwise gets you killed. This is also not an illusion to be transcended and discarded. It is the accurate description of your life *as the particular finite pattern you are*. The lion really is in the grass sometimes. Lunch really is required.

Now here is the error that has wrecked most attempts to live wisely, in both directions.

Live *only* from the worldview of infinity and you get a beautiful, useless quietism—or worse. If nothing is truly separate and everything already is, why feed the hungry, why resist the tyrant, why do anything at all? The suffering is “just another pattern”; the cruelty is “the one playing with itself.” This is the failure mode of the spiritual bypass: people who have tasted the ocean and concluded that the waves don’t matter, who use “all is one” to excuse indifference to the very real agony of particular beings. It is the mystic who lets the world burn because, from far enough away, the fire is just light. A pure ethics of infinity dissolves into *anything goes*, which is exactly the objection we started this part with—and against a pure infinity worldview, the objection is *correct*.

But live *only* from the worldview of scarcity and you get the opposite catastrophe, the one we documented at length in the last part: the war of all against all, the endless grasping, the treatment of every other being as

competitor and every situation as zero-sum. This is the failure mode we already know intimately, because it is the default. It is the world as it mostly is. A pure ethics of scarcity isn't really an ethics at all; it is just the instinct wearing a suit, rationalizing whatever it already wanted to do.

So the answer to “can you derive an ethics from an infinite world?” is: *not from the infinite world alone, and not from the scarce world alone, but from the act of holding both at once*. Ethics lives in the relationship between them. It is what happens when a being who knows it is infinite consents to act fully within its finitude—when you let the truth of connection inform every choice you make inside the world of separation. The infinity worldview supplies the *why*: there is no real other, all suffering is in some sense your own, every being is an irreplaceable face of the one reality, so cruelty is not forbidden but *confused*, a kind of blindness. The scarcity worldview supplies the *where and how*: here, in this actual body, with these actual limited resources, facing this actual person who can actually be helped or harmed, right now, with no escape into abstraction. Take away the first and your ethics has no foundation, only fear and bargaining. Take away the second and your ethics has no *application*, only serene words floating above a burning world.



Let me make this concrete, because it can sound abstract until you put it in a body.

Imagine someone wrongs you—cheats you, betrays you, genuinely harms you. From pure scarcity, the response writes itself: they are the enemy, they took what was yours, retaliate, protect your status, never let them do it again. This is the instinct, and it is not stupid; sometimes you really do need to protect yourself. From pure infinity, the response also writes itself, and it is just as incomplete: there is no real harm because there is no real other, so do nothing, feel nothing, it's all the play of the one. Neither of these is wisdom.

Wisdom is the third thing, the thing only available when you hold both. It sees, clearly, with the scarcity eye, that a real person did a real harm and that real consequences may be necessary—maybe you end the relationship, maybe you seek justice, maybe you simply protect yourself and walk away. And it sees, simultaneously, with the infinity eye, that this person is not finally other than you, that their cruelty came from their own blindness and fear, that hatred would only deepen the very illusion of separateness that caused the harm in the first place. So you act—you might act *firmly*, even forcefully—but

you act without contempt, without the poison of othering, from clarity rather than from fear. You do what the situation actually requires, but you do not do it from hatred, because hatred is a factual error. That is the ethics of infinity meeting the world of scarcity. It does not tell you, in advance, exactly what to do. It tells you the *spirit* in which a real human being, awake to both truths, goes about deciding. And learning to decide from that place—not from a rulebook, but from that doubled clarity—is the whole of the art, and the subject of the chapters that remain.

22. What Follows From Seeing Clearly

If wisdom is holding both worldviews at once, then a real ethics should fall out of that doubled seeing—not as commandments handed down, but as the natural shape of how things look once you are standing in the right place. And it does. Let me trace what comes into view, because these are the load-bearing conclusions of the entire book, and every one of them is a *recognition* rather than a rule.

The first is the radical equality of every being. In an infinite reality where everything exists and all is connected, there is simply no platform on which to stand and declare one form of existence worth more than another. Every being is an irreplaceable angle on the whole—a perspective that exists nowhere else, an experience the universe is having in exactly one place. Notice that this cuts in a direction opposite to what people fear about an infinite cosmos. We worry that infinity makes us *insignificant*—one speck among endless specks, lost in the vastness. The truth is the reverse. You are not redundant in an infinite universe; you are *essential*, because you are the only place this particular view is being seen, the one note without which the chord is not complete. The vastness does not shrink you. It needs you. And it needs the stranger, and the enemy, and the creature you were about to step on, in exactly the same way.

The second is that suffering is real but not the final word. Hold both eyes open and you neither deny pain nor drown in it. The scarcity eye sees clearly: bodies break, hearts grieve, loss is loss and it hurts, and no amount of cosmic perspective makes a child's death acceptable. The infinity eye sees something else, equally true: that the particular *kind* of suffering that comes from believing yourself a lonely speck in an indifferent void—the suffering of meaninglessness, of cosmic abandonment, of being fundamentally and finally alone—is suffering built on a factual error, and error can be corrected. Not all suffering can be dissolved; a body in pain is in pain. But the second arrow, as the Buddhists call it—the suffering we add to our suffering by misunderstanding it—that one can be set down. You can grieve without despair. You can hurt without being annihilated. There is a floor beneath the pain, and the floor holds.

The third is that ethics is a matter of clarity, not obedience. This is the great turn, the thing that separates this whole approach from the divine-

command morality we examined earlier. You do not refrain from harming others because a rule forbids it or a punishment awaits. You refrain because, when you see clearly, you recognize that there are no others in the way you feared—that what looks like a separate being to be used or discarded is another expression of the very same reality you are. Compassion, from this place, is not a moral achievement you grit your teeth to perform. It is the *natural response to accurate perception*, the way pulling your hand from a flame is the natural response to heat. Cruelty turns out to require ignorance; it can only be done to someone you have first convinced yourself is fundamentally other. Love requires no such effort. Love is just what is left when the ignorance is removed. This is why the saints across every tradition describe goodness not as strain but as relief, not as a heavy duty but as a kind of homecoming. They are not better at obeying. They are better at *seeing*.

The fourth is freedom. If at the deepest level you are an expression of infinite reality, then the stories that have been written over you—by your culture, your wounds, your history, your worst day—are real as patterns but not final as identity. They shape the particular wave you are; they do not touch the ocean you are made of. This is not a denial of trauma or circumstance; those are real and they constrain real lives in real ways, and pretending otherwise is its own cruelty. It is something subtler: the recognition that no circumstance, however crushing, reaches all the way down to what you most fundamentally are. There is a part of you that the worst that has happened to you has not touched and cannot touch. That recognition is not passivity. It is the very ground of the courage to change things, because you can only fight free of a story you have stopped believing is the whole of you.

And the fifth is responsibility—the one that keeps this from floating off into private bliss. If you are not separate from the world, then the world's suffering is not somebody else's department. What happens to any being is, in the deepest accounting, happening to the one reality you also are. This does not mean you must shoulder all the pain of an infinite cosmos; no finite creature can, and the attempt is just another way of making it about yourself. It means that the pull toward care, toward repair, toward showing up for what is in front of you—that pull is not a burden laid on you from outside by a moralizing authority. It is the natural expression of what you actually are, the whole reaching out to tend itself through your particular hands. You are not commanded to love your neighbor. You are invited to notice that, in a way that is literally true, your neighbor is you.

23. The Ethics That Cannot Be Named

Now I have to take something away from you, and it is the very thing you are probably most hoping I will give. You want, by this point, the rule. The method. The decision procedure that, fed any situation, outputs the right thing to do. I understand the hunger for it—it is the same hunger that built every system we surveyed at the start of this part. And I have to tell you, as honestly as I know how, that it does not exist, and that its non-existence is not a gap in this book but one of its central truths.

The Tao that can be spoken is not the eternal Tao.

— Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, Chapter 1

Lao Tzu opens the oldest book of practical wisdom in the world by warning you that the wisdom cannot be put into words—and then writes eighty more chapters anyway, because the pointing is still worth doing even though the moon is not the finger. I am in the same position. Everything true I can say about how to act will be, necessarily, a finger. The actual rightness of an actual act, in an actual moment, between actual people, is too rich, too particular, too entangled with everything else to be compressed into language without losing exactly the thing that made it right. This is not mysticism dodging the hard question. It is the most practical observation in the book, and here is why it is true.

No two situations are ever the same. The general rule—*tell the truth, keep your promises, do no harm*—is built by averaging over countless particular cases, and the averaging throws away the very details that determine what is actually called for here, now, with this person, against this history, under these constraints. That is why every rule has its famous exceptions—the lie that saves a life, the promise it would be wrong to keep, the harm that is the lesser of two. The rules are not wrong; they are *compressions*, and like all compressions they lose information. The map is smaller than the territory on purpose; that is what makes it portable. But you cannot finally *live* from the map. At some point you have to look up at the actual road.

And there is a harder truth underneath that one, the one the outline of this book insisted on and the one I most want you to take with you: *no decision is ever perfect, and no situation ever plays out cleanly*. This is not pessimism; it is a direct consequence of everything we have established. Reality is infinite and interconnected, which means every act ripples outward through more

relationships than any mind can trace, producing some good and some harm, some foreseen and most not. You will never have all the information. You will never satisfy every legitimate claim. Every real choice between real goods leaves some good unchosen; every act of mercy to one is, sometimes, a cost to another. The fantasy of the perfectly clean decision—the one that harms no one, that you will never have cause to regret, that a sufficiently clever ethics could guarantee—is itself a symptom of the small world, of the wish to escape the irreducible messiness of being a finite actor in an infinite web. There is no escape. There is only the choice of *how to stand inside the mess*.

So what, then, makes an action ethical, if not conformity to a rule or the guarantee of a clean result? Here is the most honest answer I can give, and it is the heart of this book's ethics. An ethical action is one made from truth—from the most clear-eyed seeing of the situation you can manage, refusing the comfortable lies the scarcity instinct whispers. It is made from honesty—including honesty about your own motives, your own fear, your own stake, the parts of you that want to dress up self-interest as principle. It is made from understanding—the genuine attempt to grasp the other's situation from the inside, to see why they are doing what they are doing, to extend to them the same assumption of inner depth you grant yourself. And it is made from peace with nature—from acceptance, hard-won and never complete, of the way things actually are: that you are finite, that the situation is imperfect, that you cannot control the outcome, that you will sometimes be wrong, and that you must act anyway, with your whole heart, into uncertainty.

That is the ethics of infinity, finally stated. Not a code but an orientation. Not *what to do* but *from where to decide*. An act done from truth, honesty, understanding, and peace—even an act that turns out badly, even a choice you would make differently with more knowledge—is an ethical act, because it came from the right place, the place where both worldviews are held open at once. And an act done from fear, self-deception, contempt, and resistance to reality is an unethical one, even if it happens to produce a good result, because it came from blindness and will produce more blindness. We have had it backward. We have judged actions by their conformity to rules and their luck with outcomes, when the thing that actually matters, the thing that actually propagates good or ill through the infinite web, is the *quality of seeing* the act came from. Nicholas of Cusa called the highest knowledge “learned ignorance”—the wisdom of knowing that you do not and cannot fully

know. The ethical life begins exactly there: in the humility to admit you cannot get it perfectly right, and the courage to act with love anyway.

24. Hard Cases

An ethics that only works in easy cases is not an ethics; it is a decoration. So let me take the approach of the last two chapters into genuinely hard territory and show it working—not because I will hand you the right answers, since the whole argument has been that no rulebook can, but because watching the method grapple with real dilemmas is the only way to see what “deciding from doubled clarity” actually means in a life. I want to be upfront: in each of these cases, reasonable people who have done all the seeing I am about to describe might still land in different places. That is not a flaw in the method. As we established, no decision is ever perfect, and the fantasy that the right philosophy will dissolve every dilemma into a clean answer is itself the small world talking. What the method offers is not the perfect answer. It is the right *place to decide from*.

Start with violence. Someone is attacking a child in front of you. The pure infinity worldview, taken alone, can produce a monstrous passivity here—*all is one, the attacker and the victim are the same reality, who am I to intervene in the play of being*. This is not wisdom; it is the spiritual bypass at its most obscene, and the doubled vision rejects it instantly. The scarcity eye sees, correctly and without apology, that a real child is in real danger and that force may be the only thing that will stop it—so you act, hard, with whatever it takes. But the infinity eye is open at the same time, and it changes the *character* of the act in a way that matters enormously. You intervene to protect, not to punish; with the minimum force the situation demands, not the maximum your fury wants; and even toward the attacker—even while stopping them by force—without the inner state of hatred, because hatred is the very factual error, the very belief in a fundamental enemy, that produced the violence you are trying to stop. You can break a man’s grip without breaking your own clarity. The act looks forceful from outside. Inside, it is done from love for what you are protecting rather than hatred for what you are stopping. That difference does not show on the security camera. It shows in everything that happens afterward—in whether you become, by degrees, the thing you fought.

Take the old philosopher’s puzzle, the one Kant infamously got wrong: the murderer at the door. He has come for your friend, who is hiding in your house, and he asks you where she is. Kant, bound to his absolute rule, concluded you must not lie even here. Almost everyone feels in their bones

that this is insane, and the ethics we have built explains exactly why. The rule “do not lie” is a compression—an averaging over ten thousand ordinary cases where honesty serves connection and truth. It is an excellent rule, and you should keep it almost always. But it is a finger pointing at the moon, and the moon is the actual good the rule exists to serve: trust, clarity, the refusal to use others as objects. Here, in this case, telling the literal truth would betray every value the rule was built to protect, and serve only the murderer’s blindness. So you lie, without anguish and without apology, and you have not violated your ethics—you have fulfilled it, by serving the living good rather than the dead letter. This is what it means to say the deepest ethics cannot be written down. The rule could not foresee this room. You, standing in it, can.



Now the harder ones, the ones with no clean side at all.

Consider justice and mercy, which our whole civilization tends to treat as opposites you must choose between. Someone has done a genuine, serious wrong—not a misunderstanding, a real harm to real people. The scarcity instinct, scaled up into a society, wants what it has always wanted: retribution, the infliction of suffering to balance the scales, the casting-out of the offender. And the scarcity eye is not entirely wrong, because accountability is real and necessary; consequences protect the vulnerable and a world without them is a world handed to predators. But the infinity eye sees something the retributive instinct is blind to: that the person who did the harm is not finally other than you, that they did it from their own blindness and fear and wound, and that meeting their cruelty with cruelty only feeds the very illusion of separateness that caused it. So the doubled vision points toward a justice we are only beginning, haltingly, to imagine—one that protects the community and holds the offender genuinely accountable, that does not pretend the harm did not happen or rush to a cheap forgiveness, but that aims at *repair* rather than mere suffering, that never forgets it is dealing with a person and not a monster. Hold both and you get neither the limp permissiveness that fails the victim nor the howling vengeance that degrades everyone it touches. You get something harder and rarer: accountability without hatred. We are not very good at this yet, as a species. But every halting step our justice systems take from pure retribution toward genuine repair is a step from the small world toward the large one.

And consider forgiveness, which sits underneath all of this and which I think is one of the most misunderstood acts in human life. Forgiveness is not saying the harm did not matter. It is not reconciliation, which takes two, and it is not the abandonment of boundaries or consequences. Forgiveness, in the terms of this book, is something more precise and more freeing: it is the act of setting down the *hatred*—the inner othering—while keeping whatever clear-eyed protection the situation requires. It is releasing the poison you have been drinking in the hope that it would hurt the other person. You can forgive someone completely and still never let them near you again; the two are not in tension, because forgiveness happens inside you, in the loosening of the knot of contempt, while the boundary happens out in the world, in the clear scarcity-eyed assessment that this person is not safe. People resist forgiveness because they think it means declaring the wrong acceptable. It means no such thing. It means refusing to let someone who wronged you once go on wronging you forever by living rent-free in your hatred. That is not a gift you give them. It is a gift you give yourself, and it is available even when reconciliation is not.

Finally, the case with genuinely no right answer: competing goods, the situation where every path costs something irreplaceable. You can care for your aging parent or you can take the work across the country that is your one shot at the life you were meant for, but you cannot do both. You can tell a hard truth that will wound someone you love or keep a peace that requires a small ongoing lie. Two people you are responsible for need you at the same hour and you can only reach one. Here there is no clever ethics that dissolves the loss, and anyone who tells you otherwise is selling something. The doubled vision does not give you the answer. What it gives you is a way to *stand* inside the impossibility: to see the situation as truly as you can, to be honest with yourself about your own motives and fears, to genuinely weigh what each person before you needs, and then to choose—wholeheartedly, knowing it is imperfect, knowing you will grieve the road not taken—and to make peace, afterward, with the fact that a finite being in an infinite web cannot satisfy every claim and was never going to. That peace is not indifference. It is the hardest-won thing in the ethical life: the capacity to act decisively in the dark, to bear the unavoidable cost, and to forgive yourself for being finite. An ethical person is not one who escapes these moments. There is no escaping them. An ethical person is one who meets them from

truth and love rather than from self-deception and fear, and who does not pretend, afterward, that the loss was not real.

That is the ethics of infinity in the only place it ultimately lives: not in the seminar room but in the kitchen at midnight, in the hospital corridor, in the moment you decide what kind of person you are going to be when it actually costs you something. Which raises the last question of this part—not *what should I do*, but *how do I become someone who can reliably see this clearly when the moment comes and the old fear is screaming?* That is no longer a question of philosophy. It is a question of practice.

25. A Path for Living

If ethics is an orientation rather than a rulebook—a quality of seeing rather than a set of instructions—then the practical question changes completely. It is no longer “what are the rules?” It is “how do I become the kind of person who sees clearly, and keeps seeing clearly even when the alarm is ringing?” That is a question not of knowledge but of *practice*, and here, at last, the contemplative traditions and the modern science line up so neatly that it would be strange not to take them seriously together.

The oldest and most reliable technology is meditation—not as a relaxation app, though it will relax you, but as the systematic loosening of the very machinery we diagnosed in Part Three. Remember the default mode network, the self-narrating apparatus that manufactures the sense of being a separate someone behind your eyes. Meditation is, more than anything else, sustained practice at watching that machinery run without being run by it. You sit, you attend, and you notice the scarcity instinct arise—the craving, the grievance, the threat-response, the story of *not enough*—and instead of obeying it, you simply see it. *There it is again*. And in that small gap between the stimulus and the reaction, between the whisper and the deed, the whole of human freedom lives. The neuroscience confirms what the meditators reported for millennia: long-term practice quiets amygdala reactivity and strengthens prefrontal regulation. It does not delete the instinct—nothing deletes the instinct—but it loosens its grip, turns the command back into a whisper you can hear without having to follow. This is the trainable skill at the center of the ethical life: widening the gap.

But meditation is not the only path, and formal practice is not required of everyone, and I would distrust any book that told you it was. The recognition of connection can be cultivated by anything that thins the sense of separateness. The Bhagavad Gita names three roads and insists they reach the same place: the path of knowledge, the path of devotion, and the path of action—of work done wholeheartedly without grasping at the fruits. Service to others dissolves the small self as surely as sitting on a cushion; so does immersion in nature, where the sheer scale and aliveness of the world quiets the chatter; so does any creative work done with total absorption; so does love, which is the experience of another’s good becoming as real to you as your own. The Sufis called it *dhikr*, remembrance, and located it in every moment rather than in a special posture. Zen insisted that awakening is

“nothing special”—available in chopping wood and carrying water, in any act done with undivided attention. The point is not the technique. The point is the thinning of the wall, and there are as many ways to thin it as there are honest lives.

And there is a compass you carry with you always, one we met back in Part Two and can now put to use: the body. Your nervous system is not neutral about how you are living. It rewards connection with health and punishes isolation with disease, and it does so in real time, in feelings you can learn to read. Contempt, grasping, the adversarial crouch—these register in the body as contraction, tension, a kind of low-grade siege. Generosity, honesty, genuine contact—these register as opening, ease, vitality. This is not a perfectly reliable moral oracle; the instinct can make fear feel like wisdom and make the comfortable lie feel like peace, which is why it must be trained alongside the seeing rather than trusted blindly. But over time, as the seeing clarifies, the body becomes a startlingly good guide. Move, on the whole, toward what brings openness, aliveness, and connection. Move, on the whole, away from what brings contraction, defensiveness, and the need to make yourself small or someone else smaller. This is not a moral prescription imposed from outside. It is alignment with what you already, in your flesh, are.

So the path is simple to state, even though it is the work of a lifetime to walk: attend to your experience with growing clarity; notice, again and again, where the small self and its scarcity are being constructed; let those constructions be seen for what they are; and choose, in the gap that the seeing opens, to act from the larger truth rather than the smaller fear. You will fail constantly. Everyone does; the instinct is older and stronger than your resolve, and it will ambush you on tired days and frightened nights for the rest of your life. The measure of an ethical life is not that you stop failing. It is that you keep returning—that each time you catch yourself acting from the small world, you come back to the larger one a little faster, with a little less self-punishment and a little more of the patience you would extend to anyone else doing something genuinely hard. That returning, repeated ten thousand times, is the path. There is no arrival that makes it unnecessary. The returning is the destination.

We have, in this part, drawn an ethics from an infinite world—not by ignoring our scarcity but by holding it in the same hand as our infinity, and

deciding, again and again, from that doubled clarity. But ethics has so far stayed mostly personal: you, and the people in front of you, and how you meet them. The hardest test is still ahead. Because we do not only live as individuals making private choices. We live in crowds, in nations, in the vast machinery of governing one another—and it is there, in the arena we call politics, that our gap between knowing and doing does its most spectacular damage, and where everything we have learned will be tested at the largest and most dangerous scale.

PART FIVE

POLITICS

*How the noble work of governing one another
curdles into herd and noise—and what it would
take to lead us back toward each other*

*Nothing is more difficult, and therefore more precious, than to
be able to decide.*

— Napoleon Bonaparte (attributed)

Everything in this book has been moving toward a single arena, the one where our condition is hardest to bear and most dangerous to get wrong: the place where we try to live together at scale. You can hold both worldviews on a meditation cushion. You can act from truth and understanding with the person in front of you. But politics is where eight billion scarcity-animals, each locked in their own small world, attempt to share a planet—and it is here, more than anywhere, that the gap between what we know and what we do threatens to end us.

I want to approach politics differently than most writing does, because most writing about politics is itself a move *in* politics—an attempt to get you onto a team. I am not going to do that. I am not going to tell you which side is right, partly because that would betray the entire argument of this book, and partly because the thing I most want you to see is a level *beneath* the sides, a dynamic that captures left and right, every party and every faction, with perfect impartiality. The disease I want to diagnose does not care about your politics. It has infected every politics there has ever been. And it is the same disease we have been tracking all along—the scarcity instinct, the small world, the finger mistaken for the moon—now operating in the largest and most consequential theater of human life.

So we will begin by taking politics seriously as something genuinely noble, because it is, and because you cannot understand a corruption until you understand the good thing it corrupts. Then we will watch, step by step, how the noble thing curdles—into herd, into noise, into the strange spectacle of people arguing not to find the truth but simply to win. We will look honestly at how our newest machines have poured accelerant on the oldest fire in the brain. And then, in the last chapters, we will ask the only question that finally matters: what would it take to lead one another, and follow one another, back

toward the larger world—and what does that ask of you, who are almost certainly not a senator, but who vote and argue and post and raise children and set, in a hundred small ways every day, the temperature of the world the rest of us have to live in.

26. The Noblest Game

Let me begin with a defense of politics, because it has become so easy to sneer at that we have forgotten what it is for.

Strip away everything we have come to despise about it—the cynicism, the careerism, the spectacle—and at its root politics is one of the most extraordinary things our species ever invented. It is the technology by which strangers cooperate. Think back to Part Three: we are animals built to trust a band of a hundred and fifty, wired to treat everyone past that boundary as a potential threat. By every expectation of our biology, large-scale human society should be impossible. A city of millions, full of people who will never meet, who nonetheless stop at red lights, pay into shared funds, keep their contracts, and refrain from killing each other over scarce goods—this is a miracle of coordination so familiar that we have stopped seeing it as remarkable. Politics, at its best, is the ongoing work of producing that miracle. It is how we extend the circle of cooperation past the point where the instinct wants to slam it shut.

Every law is, in this light, an attempt to keep competition from becoming violence. Every treaty is an effort to replace war with words. Every constitution is a device for stopping power from simply devouring the weak. Every functioning institution—the court that resolves a dispute without bloodshed, the legislature that lets rivals fight with votes instead of swords, the agency that gets clean water to a city of strangers—is a small victory of the cooperation instinct over the scarcity instinct, hard-won and perpetually at risk. We built these things against the grain of our own nature, and the fact that they work at all, even imperfectly, is among the genuine glories of being human.

And the people who do this work well deserve a kind of honor we have almost stopped giving. To govern well is to serve—to take on the exhausting, mostly thankless task of holding the cooperative structure together against the constant pull of everyone’s private scarcity, including your own. The public servant who quietly makes the trains run, the legislator who does the unglamorous work of writing a law that will help people they will never meet, the leader who tells a frightened population a hard truth instead of a flattering lie—these are not naïve idealists. They are doing the most necessary work there is, the work of widening the circle. The word “politics” comes from *polis*,

the shared life of the city. At its origin it means, simply, *the things we must figure out together*. There is nothing more important. There is, arguably, nothing else.

I insist on all this at the outset because the rest of this part is going to be hard on politics, and I do not want that hardness to be mistaken for contempt. It is the opposite of contempt. You do not grieve the corruption of a thing you never valued. We are about to watch something precious go wrong, and it matters that you feel, first, how precious it is.

27. The Herd and the Word

So how does it curdle? How does the noblest game—the art of cooperating with strangers—become the thing we now recoil from, the thing that makes people turn off the news and lose faith in one another?

It curdles the moment the players stop serving the shared world and start serving the herd.

Remember the tribal instinct from Part Three—Tajfel’s experiment, where people sorted into groups on the flip of a coin instantly began favoring their own and shortchanging the others, for no reward, against strangers they would never meet. That instinct is the raw material of all politics, the energy it runs on. Channeled well, it becomes solidarity, patriotism, the willingness to sacrifice for a common good. Channeled badly—or rather, left to run on its own—it becomes the single most destructive force in public life: the reduction of every question to *us versus them*. And here is the crucial thing the instinct does, the thing that explains almost everything that has gone wrong: once a person’s identity fuses with a group, *truth stops mattering and belonging takes over*. The question is no longer “what is actually the case?” but “what does someone like me believe?” The position becomes a uniform. To change your mind is no longer to learn; it is to defect, to betray the tribe, to risk the ancient terror of exile that we saw the brain processes as a threat to life itself.

This is herd mentality, and it is worth being precise about what it does to a mind, because it is not stupidity—some of the most intelligent people are the most thoroughly captured. What it does is *outsource cognition to the group*. The herd member no longer reasons toward conclusions; they receive conclusions from the herd and then deploy their considerable intelligence to defend them. The brilliant lawyer’s mind, turned not toward finding the truth but toward winning the case that was assigned before any evidence was heard. And because every tribe does this at once, public life fills up with enormously clever people who have stopped thinking in the only sense that matters—who could not, if you asked them, tell you what would change their mind, because nothing could; their mind is not theirs to change. It belongs to the herd.

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And then there is what happens to language, which may be the deepest corruption of all, and which connects directly back to the problem we met in Part Two with the finger and the moon.

Words are how the intersubjective world is built. Money, law, nation, rights—all of it is made of agreements, and agreements are made of words. So when words go bad, the whole shared world goes bad with them. And in a captured politics, words go very bad, in a specific and recognizable way: *they detach from their meanings and become weapons*. A word like “freedom” or “justice” or “safety” stops pointing at anything in the world and starts functioning purely as a flag—a sound that signals which tribe you belong to and rallies your side against the other. The word no longer carries meaning between people; it carries allegiance. Two people can use the identical word, “justice,” and mean by it not slightly different things but nearly opposite things, and neither notices, because neither is actually using the word to *refer* to anything anymore. They are using it to fight.

This is what the Taoist warning—*the name that can be named is not the eternal name*—looks like when it rots completely. Language was always an imperfect finger pointing at a reality beyond it. In a healthy conversation, we use the imperfect words to point, together, at something real, and we forgive the imperfection because we are both looking where the finger points. In a captured politics, no one is looking at the moon anymore. Everyone is staring at the fingers, scoring them, weaponizing them, accusing the other side’s fingers of being crooked. The words have come entirely loose from the world. And once that happens, argument changes its nature completely. It stops being a shared search for what is true and becomes pure combat—people arguing not to understand but to win, not to find the truth but to defeat an enemy, often not even about anything anymore. You have watched this; we all have; perhaps you have done it, late at night, fingers moving, heart pounding with a righteousness that felt, in the moment, exactly like virtue. At the end of the day, as the people I wrote this book for know in their bones, so much of it is people arguing to argue—performing conviction for their side, generating heat that warms no one and light that illuminates nothing.

Here is the tragedy laid bare in the language of this whole book. Politics is the management of the intersubjective world—the small world of Part Three, the made-up layer of money and status and nation that we agreed to treat as real. That world is necessary; we cannot live together without it. But

when politics forgets that the small world is *floating in a larger one*—when it loses all contact with nature, with the infinite, with the simple physical reality of human beings who bleed and grieve and need to eat—then it becomes a closed loop, a game of words referring only to other words, status contests over symbols that have lost even their symbolic meaning. It becomes the small world with the windows painted over, a room full of people fighting over the furniture, having forgotten there was ever an outside. And the people trapped in that room are not villains. They are us, running the oldest program in the brain, on the most powerful machinery we have ever built—which is exactly where we have to look next.

28. The Machine of Extremism

If herd mentality and the rot of language are ancient—and they are; demagogues and sophists are as old as the polis—then we have to ask why our own moment feels so uniquely out of control. Why does it seem, to so many people across so many countries, that the center is collapsing, that the extremes are swallowing everything, that public life has become a fever that will not break? The instinct has not changed. We are running the same Pleistocene software our ancestors ran. What has changed, catastrophically, is the *machine the software is running on*.

Recall the technological treadmill from Part Three—how every tool that solves a scarcity creates a new one. The internet solved the scarcity of information and created a scarcity of attention. And once attention became the scarce resource, an entire industry arose to capture it, and discovered, through relentless trial and error, exactly which buttons in the ancient brain to press to hold a human eye against its will. The answer, it turned out, was the buttons we have spent this whole book describing. Threat. Tribe. Outrage. The amygdala. The machine learned that nothing holds attention like fear and fury, that *us versus them* is the most engaging content there is, that a person shown something that makes them feel righteous indignation toward an enemy will stay, and scroll, and come back. And so the machine, optimizing coldly for engagement, began feeding billions of people a steady diet of exactly the stimulus most likely to activate the worst of our nature.

Think about what this means in the terms we have built. For all of history, the scarcity instinct fired in response to actual local conditions—a real rival, a real shortage, a real threat in the actual grass. It was at least *connected to reality*, and it switched off when the threat passed. Now imagine that instinct fed continuously, all day, by a machine engineered to trigger it—a machine that searches the entire planet for the most enraging thing that happened today and delivers it to you personally, then measures whether you reacted, and if you did, brings you more. The threat never passes, because there is always another one somewhere on a planet of eight billion, and the machine will always find it. The alarm that evolved to ring occasionally now rings without pause. We are marinating the oldest fear circuit in the brain in a steady drip of manufactured threat, and then wondering why everyone seems so afraid and so angry.

This is the engine of modern extremism, and notice that it requires no conspiracy and no villain—only the instinct plus the machine plus the market. The dynamics do the rest. People are sorted, by what holds their attention, into ever more isolated information worlds, each one showing them a different reality, each one portraying the other side not as mistaken but as monstrous. The middle ground, which is where cooperation actually happens, generates no engagement and so disappears from view; the reasonable, uncertain, both-sides-have-a-point position is invisible to the machine because it does not inflame. Moderation becomes literally unprofitable. And the people rewarded—with attention, with status, with power—are increasingly those who perform the most extreme version of tribal loyalty, the ones who never concede, never doubt, never humanize the enemy. We have built a machine that selects, at planetary scale, for exactly the traits that destroy the shared world, and we have plugged the entire species into it.

And here is why this is not just one more problem among many, why it deserves the alarm I am sounding. Layer this machinery over the modern predicament we glimpsed earlier: a species with the power to end itself. The scarcity instinct operating through stone tools produced a tribal skirmish. The same instinct operating through nuclear weapons, engineered pathogens, a destabilized climate, and increasingly autonomous technology produces something with no precedent—the possibility that a tribal fever, amplified by machines, in a population that has lost the capacity to talk across its divisions, could drive irreversible catastrophe. A Pleistocene brain, wired into a planetary outrage machine, holding civilization-ending power. That is the configuration we are actually in. It is the most dangerous arrangement in the history of life on Earth, and pretending otherwise is a luxury we no longer have.

I do not say this to frighten you—or rather, I say it the way you would shout to wake someone in a house that is filling with smoke, which is to say, with fear but also with the absolute conviction that there is still time to get out. Because the machine, for all its power, is exploiting something *in us*, and what is in us can be seen, and what can be seen can be changed. The same self-awareness that let us diagnose the scarcity instinct lets us diagnose this. We are not condemned to be the machine's fuel. But getting free of it will require something the machine is specifically built to destroy, and it is the rarest and most necessary political resource of our age. It will require us to be led, and to lead one another, back toward each other.

29. The Leadership We Need

What would it actually look like to lead us out of this? Not in the language of policy—I have no interest here in telling you what to think about taxes or borders—but in the language of this book, the language of the larger and the smaller world. What kind of leader, and what kind of citizen, could begin to widen the windows of the room we have sealed ourselves into?

I think the answer is almost the opposite of what the machine rewards, which is precisely why it is so hard and so necessary. The machine rewards certainty; we need leaders who can say *I don't know*. The machine rewards never conceding; we need leaders who can say *I was wrong*. The machine rewards the dehumanizing of the enemy; we need leaders whose fundamental orientation is toward the humanity of the other side. Everything the moment selects for, we need to deliberately select against. Let me be specific about what that means, because these are not vague pieties—each one is a direct application of the ethics we built in the last part, scaled up to public life.

We need leaders, first, who can admit when they are wrong. This sounds small. It is enormous. The inability to say “I made a mistake” is the scarcity instinct in its purest political form—the conviction that to concede anything is to lose status, and to lose status is to die. A leader who can stand up and say *I got that wrong, and here is what I have learned* is doing something almost superhuman against the pull of the instinct, and is also modeling the single most important capacity a free people can have: the ability to update, to learn, to change course before the cliff. A culture where admitting error is fatal is a culture that cannot correct itself, and a culture that cannot correct itself will eventually walk off the edge of whatever mistake it is currently committed to. The willingness to be wrong out loud is not weakness. It is the precondition of wisdom, in a person and in a nation.

We need leaders who can ask for help, and ask why, and listen to the answer. The posture of the captured politician is omniscience—I alone have the answers, I alone can fix it. The posture we actually need is closer to humility: the recognition that the problems are genuinely hard, that no one has the whole picture, that the other side, however much you disagree with it, is responding to something real, and that the first job of a leader is not to talk but to listen—to ask the people who disagree *why*, and to actually want to know. This is the political form of the “understanding” we made central to

ethics. Most of our bitterest divisions are not between good people and evil people. They are between people who are afraid of different things, who have lived different lives, who are each seeing a real piece of a reality too big for anyone to see whole. A leader who can hold that—who can say to the other tribe, *I think I understand what you are afraid of, and your fear is not crazy*—is doing the actual work of politics, the widening of the circle, the reweaving of the torn fabric.

We need leaders, and citizens, who can apologize, and feel empathy, and mean it. The whole machinery of tribal politics runs on the denial of the enemy's humanity, and the antidote is the stubborn insistence on it. Empathy is not agreement and it is not weakness; it is the simple refusal to forget that the person on the other side of the argument is, like you, a frightened animal doing their best with a brain built for a world that no longer exists, an irreplaceable face of the same reality you are. From the standpoint of the larger world, the one we kept returning to in the first half of this book, the "enemy" is not finally other than you at all. You will still disagree with them; you may still have to fight them, hard, for things that genuinely matter. But you can do it the way we learned in the last part—firmly, even forcefully, but without contempt, without the poison of othering, from clarity rather than from hatred. A politics conducted in that spirit is not soft. It is the only kind that does not eventually consume everyone in it.

And underneath all of these is the deepest one, the one I think the whole book has been trying to earn the right to say. We need to realign our values with what we actually know to be true in our hearts. Every person reading this knows, in the quiet places the machine cannot reach, certain things: that cruelty is wrong, that honesty matters, that the suffering of a child is the suffering of a child regardless of which tribe the child belongs to, that we are all going to die and that this should make us gentler with one another rather than more vicious. We *know* this. It is the innate knowledge of Part Two, written into us, recoverable by anyone who gets quiet enough to listen. The catastrophe of our politics is that it runs on a frantic noise specifically engineered to drown that knowledge out—to keep us so afraid and so tribal and so busy fighting over words that we never get quiet enough to hear what we already know. Leadership, in the end, is not mainly about policy. It is about helping a frightened people get quiet enough to remember what they already know in their hearts, and then having the courage to act on it together. It is okay not to know. It is okay to need help. It is okay to be wrong, and to say

so, and to begin again. That is not the end of strength. That, as anyone who has ever actually grown knows, is where strength begins.

30. The Widening Circle

I have painted a dark picture of our political moment, and I meant every stroke of it. But if I left you there, I would be lying by omission, because the longest view tells a different and more hopeful story—and we need that story now, not as a comfort but as evidence, because despair is just the scarcity instinct applied to the future, and it is as factually wrong as all its other applications.

Here is the evidence. The circle of who counts as fully human—whose suffering registers, whose life is protected, who sits inside the “us” rather than the disposable “them”—has, over the long arc of history, *widened*. Not smoothly, not without monstrous reversals, not everywhere at once, but unmistakably. For most of human existence, slavery was a universal and unquestioned institution, found in nearly every society, defended by philosophers and scriptures alike; within a few centuries it went from normal to abolished in law across the entire world, and is now, wherever it persists, a crime that hides its face. For nearly all of recorded history, half the species was legally subordinate to the other half; within a handful of generations that arrangement has been overturned across much of the world. Torture as public entertainment, the ownership of human beings, the casual killing of those outside one’s tribe, the absolute rule of kings, the legal inferiority of whole categories of people by birth—these were once the water everyone swam in, and one by one they have been named as wrongs and, haltingly, pushed back. The philosopher Peter Singer called this the expanding circle, the slow extension of moral concern outward from the family to the tribe to the nation to, at least in aspiration, all of humanity and beyond it to other living things. It is real. It happened. It is, in the deepest sense, the cooperation instinct of Part Two winning ground, century by century, against the tribal instinct of Part Three.

Why does this matter so much for everything I have argued? Because it proves the central claim is not a fantasy. The scarcity instinct, the tribal reflex, the small world—these are powerful, but they are *not destiny*. The aperture can widen. We have watched it widen. A creature shaped by the savanna to care only for its band has, through enormous moral effort across many lifetimes, taught itself to care—imperfectly, incompletely, but really—for strangers it will never meet on the far side of the planet. This is the most encouraging fact in the human story, and the outrage machine works

overtime to keep you from seeing it, because a person who believes nothing ever gets better is a person who has given up the fight, and a person who has given up the fight is easy to herd. The honest view is neither the cynic's "nothing changes" nor the naïf's "everything is fine." It is harder and truer than both: things have genuinely gotten better, by the sustained labor of people who refused to accept that the circle's current boundary was the final one, and that labor is unfinished and reversible and now handed to us.



So how should we think about justice and power in this light—the actual machinery of arranging a society? The two worldviews, held together, give a distinctive answer, and it cuts across our usual political camps in interesting ways.

From the scarcity eye comes a hard realism about power that no amount of spiritual feeling should be allowed to soften. Power corrupts because the scarcity instinct, handed a lever, uses it; this is not cynicism but observation, confirmed in every century. So a politics rooted in nature does not trust anyone—any party, any leader, any class, however virtuous their rhetoric—with unchecked power. It builds the structures the framers of the better constitutions understood: divided power, checks and balances, transparency, the rule of law applied to the rulers themselves, the peaceful removal of those who fail. These are not bureaucratic niceties. They are the cooperation instinct's hard-won machinery for restraining the scarcity instinct *even in the powerful*, especially in the powerful, and every erosion of them is the small world reasserting itself. The realism of Part Three demands that we design for the failure of virtue, not the success of it—that we build a system that works even when bad people run it, because sometimes bad people will.

But from the infinity eye comes the *aim* that the machinery is supposed to serve, and without it the machinery is just an efficient way of managing a war. The aim is a society organized, as far as a society of scarcity-animals can be, around the recognition that every person is an irreplaceable face of the one reality—that the suffering of any of its members is a real cost to the whole, that no one is disposable, that the point of the entire apparatus is to widen the circle and tend the abundant goods the market cannot price. This is what keeps justice from collapsing into either of its two failure modes: the heartless efficiency that optimizes the aggregate while grinding up individuals, and the sentimental permissiveness that means well and protects no one. Real justice,

in this vision, is fierce about both—fierce in its protection of the actual vulnerable person in front of us, and fierce in its refusal to dehumanize even those it must restrain.

I am not naming a party here, and I will not, because the moment this becomes a team it dies; the tribal instinct would simply swallow it as one more flag to wave against the other side. What I am describing is a *disposition* that any party, any movement, any citizen could carry into the work: clear-eyed about power and unsentimental about institutions, and at the same time animated by the recognition that the stranger is not finally a stranger. Most of our political traditions hold one of these and distrust the other—some prize order and realism while forgetting the larger circle, others prize compassion and inclusion while going naïve about power and human nature. The synthesis asks for both at once, which is exactly why it is so rare and so needed: the warm heart and the cold eye, in the same person, at the same time.

And here, once more, is the part the machine wants you to forget, the part worth ending on. The circle has never once widened from the top down alone. Every expansion of it—every abolition, every extension of dignity to people who had been denied it—began with individuals who decided, against their tribe and often against their own interest, to treat as fully human someone their society had taught them to discount. It began in conversations, in refusals, in small daily acts of seeing across the line before any law required it. The widening of the circle is not something that happens to us. It is something we do, one relationship at a time, and then eventually, when enough of us have done it, the laws catch up to what the people have already become. You are not waiting for history. You are, in your treatment of every person the small world tells you not to count, *writing* it.

31. A Politics Rooted in Nature

Let me gather all of this into the vision the book has been building toward, and then say the part that matters most, which is what it has to do with you.

A healthy politics, in the terms of this book, is one that never forgets that the small world is floating in a larger one. It remembers that all the tokens it fights over—the money, the offices, the borders, the words—are human inventions, real only by agreement, useful only so long as they serve the actual living beings underneath them. It keeps the windows open. It stays in contact with nature, with the physical reality of human need and human suffering, with the simple facts that no ideology can repeal: that people must eat, that children must be cared for, that the planet has limits, that everyone dies, that no one chose to be born into the tribe they were born into. A politics rooted in nature uses the small world—it must; you cannot run a society without money and law and shared agreements—but it does not *worship* the small world, does not mistake the game for reality, does not let the words come loose from the things they were meant to serve. It holds both worldviews, exactly as the ethics of the last part asked an individual to: the clear-eyed realism of scarcity, which knows that resources are limited and that institutions must restrain the instinct, married to the larger vision of connection, which knows that the stranger is not finally a stranger and that there is, at bottom, enough.

I am aware of how idealistic this sounds against the daily reality of how power actually works. I am not naïve about it; nothing in Part Three would let me be. The scarcity instinct will not be voted out of office. There will always be people who seek power for its own sake, always the pull of the herd, always the temptation of the cheap tribal win. A politics rooted in nature is not a utopia we arrive at and then relax into. It is, like the ethical life of the individual, a *returning*—something we lose and recover and lose again, a direction we lean rather than a destination we reach. The point is not to be perfect. The point is which way we are facing, and how fast we come back when we drift.

And here is the thing I most need you to take from this part, because it is the thing the machine most wants you to forget. *You are not a spectator*. It is tempting to read a chapter about leadership and think of it as advice for senators, a wish list for other, more powerful people. But the herd is made of

individuals, and the temperature of the whole is set by the temperature of its parts, and you are a part. Every time you refuse the cheap tribal win—every time you steelman the other side instead of strawmanning it, every time you say “I might be wrong about this,” every time you treat someone you disagree with as a confused human rather than a monster, every time you get quiet enough to hear what you actually know in your heart instead of what your tribe is shouting—you are doing the real work of politics, at the only scale any of us actually controls. You are widening the circle by exactly one person, which is the only way the circle has ever widened. The machine runs on billions of small acts of tribal reflex. It can only be starved by billions of small acts of the opposite. There is no other mechanism. The leaders we need will not descend from somewhere; they will rise, eventually, from a people who have made it safe and honorable again to be honest, to be humble, to be kind across the line. We make them by becoming, in our own small spheres, the thing we are waiting for.

We have come a long way from the logical proof we started with—from “something exists” all the way to how you should conduct yourself in an argument with your uncle about the news. That is not a detour. That is the whole point. The argument was always heading here, to the actual texture of how we treat one another, because that is where the infinite either shows up or doesn't. All that remains now is to make the return trip—to come all the way back down from the totality of nature to this small, dear, maddening human world, and to ask what it is finally all for, and what, knowing everything we now know, we might do with the one wild life each of us has been so improbably given.

CONCLUSION

THE WAY HOME

*We are stardust, we are golden, we are billion-year-old carbon,
and we've got to get ourselves back to the garden.*

—Joni Mitchell, “Woodstock” (1970)

We have taken a long journey, and I want to retrace it one last time, quickly, from a height—because the shape of the whole, seen all at once, says something that none of the parts could say alone.

We began as far out as it is possible to go: with the one fact you cannot doubt, *something exists*, and we followed it, link by link, to a conclusion that should by rights be shouted from rooftops and is instead mostly forgotten—that reality is infinite, that it leaves nothing out, that it has no edge and no outside and no true emptiness anywhere within it. Then we found that this infinite nature is not cold. It is alive, woven through with connection at every scale, from the merged cells in your body to the fungal networks under the forest, and that some part of us has always known this—that the mystics of every continent, with no contact between them, came back from the inward journey reporting the same single thing. That was the height of the book, the totality of nature, the view from everywhere.

And then we came down. We came down into the animal we actually are—the creature shaped by scarcity, running its ancient survival software in a world that no longer matches it, building a small bright world of money and status and words and then sealing itself inside, mistaking the room for the cosmos, suffering and inflicting suffering over tokens that mean nothing outside the game. We saw that this is the root of it: not evil, not a curse, but a mismatch, an old true map laid over a changed land. And we saw that knowing this, by itself, changes nothing—that the knowledge sits in one room of the house while the alarm rings in another.

Then we asked the only question that finally matters—how, then, to live—and we found that the answer was not to choose between the infinite and the animal but to *hold both at once*: to let the truth of connection inform every act we take inside the world of separation, to decide not from a rulebook but from truth, honesty, understanding, and a hard-won peace with how things are. We followed that ethics out into the crowd, into politics, and watched our gap do its most dangerous work at the largest scale—and we found, even

there, that the way back is the same way: widening the circle, opening the windows, getting quiet enough to remember what we already know.

That is the journey: from the totality of nature, down into the small human world, and now—here, at the end—back. But we do not come back empty-handed, and we do not come back to the same place. We come back, as the poet said, to arrive where we started and know it for the first time.



Because here is what the whole long argument was finally for. It was never to get you to *leave* the human world. That was never the point, and any reading of this book that ends with you floating above your own life, too enlightened to do the dishes or love your messy family or fight for something that matters, has missed it completely. The point was the opposite. The point was to let you come back into your one ordinary, scarcity-bound, gloriously specific human life—and live it *better*, more gently, more bravely, less gripped by the three-in-the-morning fear—because you now know what it is floating in.

You will still be an animal. You will still feel the old voice whisper *not enough*. You will still flinch, still grasp, still sometimes treat the people you love as competitors for scarce attention and the strangers you fear as less than fully real. The instinct does not leave. I promised you at the start that this was not a book that would make your problems dissolve, and I have kept that promise. What changes is not the instinct but your *relationship* to it. You can feel the fear arise and know it for what it is—an old program, doing its old job, in a world it no longer fits—and in the gap that knowing opens, you can choose, sometimes, to act from the larger truth instead. Not always. Not perfectly. But more often, and with less self-punishment when you fail, and with a faster return each time you drift. That returning, ten thousand times, across a whole life, is not a consolation prize. It is the thing itself. It is what a human life awake to its own situation actually looks like.

And there are moments—you have had them, and you will have more—when the gap opens all the way, and you feel it directly: the source. Standing under the stars. Holding someone you love. Sunk so deep in work or music or grief that the small self goes quiet and there is only the immense, living, connected whole, and you in it, of it, never for one instant separate from it. Those moments are not escapes from reality. They are the rare times you see reality plainly, the filter dropped, the windows flung open. They are worth

more than almost anything, not because they solve your problems but because they remind you, in your very body, what is true—that you came from this, that you are made of this, that there is, underneath all the manufactured scarcity, *enough*, and that you were never, not for one second of your improbable life, actually alone. Go toward those moments. Make room for them. They are the source of life, and a few seconds of real contact with it can carry you a very long way through the small world's noise.



So what do we do, knowing all this? We have two kinds of work, and they are really one.

The first is to untangle our words. We have wrapped one another in language gone wrong—words that no longer point at anything, that have come loose from the world and hardened into weapons, that we hurl across the lines of our tribes to wound rather than to reach. So much of our suffering is made of these wounded words: the cruel thing said and never taken back, the story we tell about the other side that makes them monsters, the argument we have a thousand times that was never really about what it was about. To untangle them is patient, unglamorous, deeply human work. It is saying the true thing simply. It is asking what someone actually means instead of assuming the worst. It is the apology, the admission, the “help me understand,” the willingness to let a word mean something again by using it honestly. It is, in the smallest and most powerful way, refusing to add to the noise.

And the second is to learn, finally, to work together—not because a rule commands it, but because we can see, when the windows are open, that there was never anyone else here to work against. We are one reality, briefly wearing eight billion faces, fighting itself over furniture in a sealed room, when the whole infinite living world is right outside, with more than enough for everyone, asking only that we stop long enough to remember it. Cooperation is not a sacrifice we make against our nature. At the deepest level it is our nature—the same cooperation that merged the first cells, that wove the forests together, that built every good thing our species ever made against the pull of its own fear. To choose it, again and again, in the face of the instinct that says we can't, is the most human and the most natural thing we can do at once.



I am aware that this can all sound very large, and that you will close this book and find yourself, in about a minute, back inside an ordinary life that does not feel infinite at all—a life of alarms and bills and someone who cut you off in traffic. So let me bring it all the way down, to the scale where it actually has to live, and tell you what any of this looks like tomorrow morning.

It looks like this. The old voice will start up early—*not enough, watch out, get yours*—and instead of obeying it, you will, once or twice, *notice* it: ah, there it is, the ancient program, running again. That small noticing is the whole revolution; everything else grows from it. It looks like treating the person in front of you—the barista, the coworker, the stranger whose politics you despise—as a real interior world rather than an obstacle or an enemy, because they are, in the most literal sense the first half of this book could establish, another face of what you are. It looks like saying the true thing simply, and asking what someone actually means instead of assuming the worst, and being willing, when you are wrong, to say so out loud. It looks like stepping outside at night, sometimes, and letting the sheer scale of things quiet you, and remembering, in your body and not just your head, that you came from this and are made of this and are held by this. It looks like doing your work, loving your people, fighting for what matters—fully, inside the small world, because that is where life is lived—while never quite forgetting the larger one it floats in.

None of that requires you to believe every word I have written. It does not require you to meditate for an hour a day or to have figured anything out or to be any further along than exactly where you are. It requires only that you remember, a little more often than you did before, that the room is not the world—and that you let that remembering soften, by degrees, the grip of the fear. That is enough. That is, in fact, the whole of it. The grand metaphysics of Part One and the daily kindness of an ordinary Tuesday are not two different things. The first is why the second is not naïve.

I called this book *The Wisdom of Everything*, and I owe you, at the end, an honest account of what that title means. It does not mean that I, or anyone, has figured everything out—the whole of Part Four was an argument that the deepest wisdom *cannot* be fully spoken, that the Tao that can be named is not the eternal Tao, that no rulebook will ever capture the living rightness of a real act in a real moment. It means something humbler and, I hope, truer. It

means the wisdom that becomes available when you remember that you are part of *everything*—that the small world is not the whole world, that you are an expression of an infinite, living, interconnected reality that leaves nothing out and that you have never for an instant left. That remembering is the beginning of wisdom. Everything else—the kindness, the courage, the honesty, the patience, the willingness to be wrong and to begin again—flows from it, the way compassion flows from clear sight.

The book opened with two true stories about you that did not seem to fit together: that you are a frightened animal, and that you are an expression of the infinite. They still don't fit together neatly, and they never will, because you are both, fully, at once, and the not-fitting is the very space you live in. But you no longer have to be torn between them. You can let the first be held inside the second—the animal cradled in the infinite, the fear held in the larger love, the small world floating, where it has always floated, in the boundless one. That holding is the whole of what I have been trying to give you.

Everything is possible. I have tried, across this whole book, to earn that sentence rather than merely assert it—to show you that in an infinite reality nothing is finally closed off, that the world we have is not the only world there could be, that the small room was always a choice and the door was never locked. The world we actually want to live in—gentler, more honest, more awake, less afraid—is not a fantasy. It is one of the possibilities that already exists in the infinite, waiting, like all of them, to be lived into. We make it the way everything is ever made: one face of the one reality at a time, one untangled word at a time, one choice of connection over fear at a time, one return, after every failure, to what we already know in our hearts.

We are stardust. We are billion-year-old carbon, briefly woken into knowing itself, given the almost unbearable gift of a few decades in which to look around and love what we find. We do not have to get ourselves back to the garden. We never left it. We only forgot, for a while, where we were standing.

Welcome home.

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