

Volume 11, Issue 3  
Spring 2016

# THE MIDWAY REVIEW

*A Journal of Essays*



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*The Midway Review* publishes informed, accessible essays featuring literary, cultural, and political commentary and criticism. It is a forum for serious reflection and civil discourse across a variety of intellectual perspectives. We are currently accepting submissions to be considered for our Fall 2016 issue. For submission guidelines, please consult [midwayreview.uchicago.edu](http://midwayreview.uchicago.edu).

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Letters to the editor may be addressed to [themidwayreview@uchicago.edu](mailto:themidwayreview@uchicago.edu). We ask that letters be limited to 350 words.

*The Midway Review* is printed by In-Print Graphics of Oak Forest, IL. Publication is made possible by the Student Government Finance Committee and the College of the University of Chicago.

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T H I S  
issue is composed in  
Alegreya, a typeface designed  
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THE  
MIDWAY REVIEW

*Volume 11, Issue 3—Spring 2016*

*We share that deliciously sick capacity for horror to distract,  
excite, inspire, and finally shock into laughter.*

*The greatest threat of evil and wrongdoing arises at this precise moment:  
when our reason merely ministers to an unquestioned absolute.*

*It is a way of speaking that hides individuals from the  
freedom of their possibilities.*

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## Letter from the Editors

Dear Reader,

Each quarter, as the editors come together to discuss submissions for our newest issue, we remember that a Midway Review piece truly takes a lot to write. They take a lot of time. Whether the prose before us has emerged from hours of painstaking editing and revising, or from years spent honing a special talent for writing, we know that it took time to polish each of those smooth turns of phrase. These pieces also take a lot from the authors themselves. Our favorite submissions reveal inspired and original insights that come from a genuine and rare form of intellectual curiosity. While the content of a Midway Review article appeals to a wide audience, its style and insights come from a unique perspective that bears the singular mental signature of its author. In this issue of the Midway Review, Rebecca Segall finds humor and humanity in the heart of horror; Elisabeth Huh questions Peter Singer and examines whether objectivity is compatible with morality; and Danny Licht dares readers to let go of narrative and reexamine the world on their own. As you read these essays, we hope that you get a better sense of the distinctive character of *The Midway Review*: we hope that you too feel struck by writing of people who are not simply intelligent, but thoughtful.

—The Editors



## The Haunted House

Rebecca Segall

My father blames my mother for my love of horror movies, and this list of her most irrevocable parenting faults will always include the time she left me in front of *Friday the 13th*, unsupervised and eleven years old. It only occurred to me about a year ago that this may have been too young. It is certainly my most vivid memory of the last bedroom my parents shared— I watched mummified in their floral-patterned black duvet as the masked killer made the rounds at Camp Crystal Lake and my parents entertained the adults out on the porch. And when I confirmed the details of that day with my mother and asked what—if anything—she had been thinking, the delight of memories reclaimed streaked her voice: “Yeah, what a classic!”

Rebecca Segall is a fourth-year in the College majoring in Classics.

It's not until you hit a certain age that you can think back on the way you were nurtured and see that some things were kind of messed up. Before that, there's no basis for comparison; your parents can do no wrong. Scenes of moonlit massacre set to '70s synth refrains haunted the end of my prepubescent life, and sometimes I feel entitled to a little self-righteousness. But in trying to account for my fierce commitment to the genre, especially in the face of film snobbery, I can't pretend seeing *Friday the 13th* wasn't a revelation. No movie had ever made me feel my own heartbeat before. No montage had ever replayed in my mind for weeks. My mother's tastes had always been a mystery to me. But it turns out that letting yourself be swept away by the occasional solid horror flick can do some good psychological work—a sort of venting outlet in its own way, horror

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can make confronting the true fears of the human pageant a little more fun.

My mother quickly fed me the horror canon and got me into the R-rated remake of *The Omen* in the sixth grade (I would need her to get me into R-rated movies at the Regal Cinema in the mall for the next five years). We walked out grumbling that it was a pale shadow of the original, but one particularly hellish jump-scare had me on edge for the next week. So I asked her if scary movie images ever lingered in her mind too. She told me the iconic *Friday* scene in which a teenager is impaled through the throat with an arrow is one of the scariest things she ever saw. “But you get over it kind of soon?” I asked. Mom checked under her bed for twenty-five years.

So sometimes I take my father’s side. Sometimes it strikes me that the parent’s job should be to help the child *not* lie awake at night fearing the outline of the sweater draped over the chair. At the same time, what most people miss about horror is its ironic power to comfort; I realize now how deeply reassuring it was for me to learn, as a preteen plagued by nightmares, that I was not alone in being a scaredy-cat. In fact, that a whole community out there shares the morbid imaginings I thought were my burden alone.

And then it strikes me that I share these with my mother too.

Before she left my father, the three of us lived in a quaint old house in New York’s forested Hudson Valley, which I was told, naturally, was haunted. It bore all the tropes, attic floorboards that moaned on windy nights, faulty fuse boxes and the works. It also came with its own neighborhood legend of drama and death: the house’s owner of a century past, now-forgotten silent film actor Holbrook Blinn, had taken a mistress from up the street—a dead end called Journey’s End Road. He refused to leave his wife for her; rejected and devastated, the poor girl hanged herself in the churchyard across the street. Within a week, the philanderer fell off his horse and broke his back, and his forsaken mistress has stalked the halls of Blinn House ever since.

An early fan of Edgar Allan Poe, I felt my mind ranneth over with

REBECCA SEGALL

the fantastical tragedy of our phantom lover. But though my father conveniently forgets that my exposure to Poe was his doing, there's no way he would have explained to me the concepts necessary to grasp Mistress Blinn's woeful tale. It's hard to distinguish between authentic early memories and those we retroactively construct for ourselves, and I don't want to falsify questionable parenting decisions on my mother's part. But it's a safe bet that mom would've been the one to divulge the nature of suicide, adultery, and the mechanics of death-by-back injury. (Actually, this last one I do remember—we were walking down Journey's End and she pointed out the spot in our backyard where the horse might've bucked.)

Outside of our ghost story retellings, though, Blinn House didn't know much mother-daughter playtime. The thing is that chronic mental illnesses, like the depression and bipolar disorder she'd later tell me runs in our family, can be hard to understand from the outside. While it's hard now to remember not understanding the reality of these disorders, what I do remember is watching my mother's highs and (mostly) lows play out before me as a mysterious and disorienting change, driven by some possessive and invisible force. Regular quality time with mom was usually out of the question

during her darker periods. But perhaps in her own morbid way, she saw our house's shred of local history as the closest she and I might come and jumped at it. Except with a heartbroken, suicidal ghost as our protagonist.



Why, I wouldn't have a child of mine, an impressionable little thing, live in such a room for worlds.

I reasoned early on that Mistress Blinn meant us no harm, or we certainly would

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have been done for by the time I was old enough to read *The Tell-Tale Heart*. I also divined that she drifted about in a white nightgown, and that the cobwebs in the unsweepable corners of the staircase were her footsteps. When my dog howled on dark and stormy nights, it was because only chocolate labs could discern her spectral form. My mother, though, would swear under oath that she glimpsed a white swish out of the corner of her eye while quilting alone one afternoon. This story overlooks several facts: that the windows in the old living room cast a notoriously sharp glare in the midday sun; that she, as I later learned, was totally drugged up on antidepressants at the time; and that the Mistress granted my mother's relationship with Blinn House the macabre romance she sought in everything.

There was one other purported sighting. At family gatherings, when my mother reminisces about the House, she loves to recount the time that I, too, experienced a brush with the other side. Allegedly, I refused to dress for preschool one morning, and stood transfixed at the window; I could only say over and over again, "There's a lady in the yard, there's a lady in the yard." (There was, of course, no such lady). The story sent me reeling back then, though regrettably it predates the age of memory-making. These days, with every telling, I'm more and more convinced that my communion with the dead was an invention of my mother's unconventional parenting style.

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Still, growing up in a haunted house—totally cool. The chilling drama of our Mistress never got old; it might have in the hands of a storyteller less brimming with the siren song of the occult. But somehow, my mother knew this story could be our story. Despite a general distance between us, she knew our compulsion towards phantoms and demons was something we could share. Ghosts may be scary, but the often overlooked value of a common fear is the comfort of commonality itself.

Nightmares were always a problem for me, but fairly early on I stopped seeking refuge under the ugly duvet. If those angels of darkness could creep into my bedroom, not even child-logic held that they couldn't infiltrate my parents' too. In fact, since evil was

## REBECCA SEGALL

A colonial mansion, a hereditary estate, I would say a haunted house,  
and reach the height of romantic felicity



coming for me regardless, it was of some solace to know my dying act would divert them from my safely sleeping family, defending the household in my glorious sacrifice. But even if I kept it to myself when I woke up at the witching hour, and even if my mother was not around much back then, I can't help but think that somehow she sensed the dark imagery causing the circles under my eyes. And in the way that horror movies help sublimate unspoken fear by bringing it out into the open, perhaps she tried to hold me close to her in her own unseemly way by forcing the corpse-like Mistress upon little me.

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My parents have since passed through various apartments in various zip codes, passing the ghost on to new tenants. To try to trace the expandings and contractings of my relationship with my mother would be like trying to count the times *Dracula* has been remade. But nothing ever really changes. So now when I visit mom at her new house in L.A. and we open up the Word document with our running list of horror movies, she wants to get high. Like, all the time.

I put my foot down and insist that if we light up now, *The Conjuring* will be just too scary. In some ways, it has always been my job to watch out for the team. My mom would convene us around some black-magic meeting point, and I would make sure it doesn't get too scary. It's hard to remember if or how the weed has affected this. Honestly, hanging out with her in L.A. is always kind of a blur.

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But I do posit a sort of counter-offer. If we wait until the end of whichever Hollywood gorefest we finally choose—until we are half-submerged in the pleather couch, nail marks on our arms from terror-clutching one another, drying off from the cathartic sweat that only a good exorcism can provoke—and *then* get stoned, it will be just what we need. I note inwardly that horror-then-smoking will maximize our time together before her boyfriend comes to pick us up. But I keep this to myself.

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I think a buddy is essential for the serious horror fan. It's a polarizing genre; there are two types of people and only scattered exceptions. You have your guys who really get off on gnawing off their fingernails while probing the depths of fear, and your guys who once saw *The Silence of the Lambs* and won't touch the stuff again. But even if you really derive pleasure from opening your heart to the subconscious realm of nightmare, it's just too scary to go it alone. It also loses much of the appeal.

I for one am a screamer, gasper, and hand-wringer, and it's nice to know someone can keep me company in that. Last year I saw a horror movie in theatres on my own for the first time and most likely the last; finding myself alone in a foreign city, and not having seen my parents in months, I sought the promise of familial nostalgia in a matinee of *Insidious Chapter 3*. The overwrought sequel to Hollywood horror master James Wan's franchise did indeed give me my money's worth as I reflexively sank into

Up and  
down and  
sideways  
they crawl,  
and those  
absurd,  
unblinking  
eyes are  
everywhere.





the charmingly predictable while still adrenaline-soaked terrors of demonic house-haunting. As others seek the familiar comfort of their favorite sitcom characters, we Wan-devotees long for those physiologically affective jump scares and eerie choral scores. But alone in my row, wrist-deep in an oversized popcorn with no one to share it with, I'd never felt less stranded. This may be hard to believe without feeling it for yourself, but sharing vulnerabilities, even if they are towards CGI-centric talking dolls (or perhaps especially if), has its own emotional utility. Cold-sweating alone each time the doll appears on screen seems to miss the point.

So it does sting me a bit that my mother doesn't have anyone to hold her hand out in California. Her boyfriend is stubbornly of that anti-Hannibal Lecter second type. Her options are to wait for my tri-yearly visits, or to venture forth without a safety net.

She called me up one day. She's home alone, she's bored, she's petting her cat, and she's in the mood to watch a good horror movie—do I have any recommendations? I'd just seen *Session 9*, a box office disaster but with some elegant moments of gripping psychological terror. The movie follows a maintenance crew clearing asbestos out of an abandoned insane asylum when things inevitably take a turn for the even spookier. The climax involves a highly disturbing lobotomy situation that I watched through the gaps between my fingers. Like the ever popular zombie, an old-fashioned lobotomy patient hits a sweet spot for most people between the abstract uncanny and visceral cringe-worthiness. Unlike the zombie, though, the lobotomy gets mileage out of realism: we know it happened in this world, to vulnerable people, and so is of an infinitely more sympathetic brand of horror. For me, it taps into a deep personal unease over mental health and madness. So I figured mom would have a good time with it.

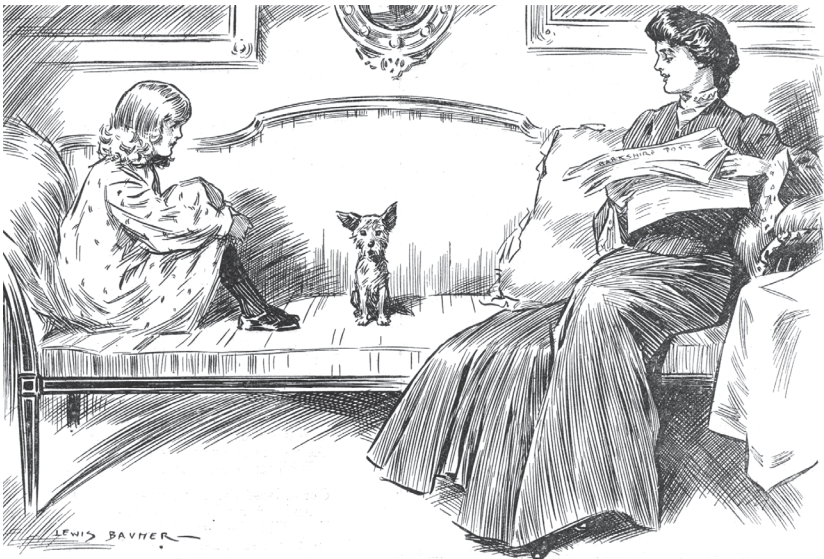
A month or so later, I hit a sort of emotional low. The jury's not out yet on how beholden anxiety-depression is to genetics, but either way, it's a mother-daughter thing. Despite the hard lines I'd like to draw between us, at a certain level my mother and I are made of the same stuff. We share diagnoses, and sometimes prescription meds if one of us accidentally runs out. So when I dip into the blues,

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I sometimes, incredibly, find myself calling her up. It was winter; I was pacing in the snow as she cooed gently that everything gets better, that I will be okay. And then her show-stopping insight: "Just think—if you'd been born a few decades earlier, they might have given you a lobotomy!"

I know these were her words because, though horrified tears were freezing on my cheeks, I scrambled for a pen and transcribed. Sometimes I believe I am forever building up a file against her. If I ever need to make a case against some irresponsible guardianship, not to mention her gift for saying the most horrifying thing at the most critical moment, I'll have the documents to back me up. For days I saw myself with half a brain, drooling in an ill-fitting 1950s hospital gown under fluorescent light. But to be fair, I did laugh—*really* laugh—for the first time in days. This was, after all, *vintage* mom.

She must have known how this would sound to my sensitive ears—we'd talked at length about *Session 9's* ghost-electroshock terror. Maybe she thought I'd take comfort knowing psychiatric treatment is making leaps and bounds. But she must also know



I used to feel that if any of the other things looked too fierce I could always hop into that chair and be safe.



## REBECCA SEGALL

we share that deliciously sick capacity for horror to distract, excite, inspire, and finally shock into laughter. It just seems like only mom would take advantage of this in consoling a depressed child.

The next time our conversation turned to our inevitable melancholy, I told her, in the tone I try to place somewhere between light-hearted jibes and sincere accusation, that, “You know, that lobotomy comment really didn’t help much.” That same singsong laughter that seized her when I’d brought up *Friday the 13th* was there again. “Look,” she said, “if we can’t see the humor in these things, I don’t know where we’ll be.”

It seems to be common knowledge that humor is a decent strategy for coping with the confounding and seemingly insurmountable perils of life. Perhaps the secret knowledge my mother and I share is that they can be mastered through fear as well. You relive and reenact your worst nightmares when you watch them on screen, but you can kind of sit back and enjoy this time around.

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I chalk up the most recent, rawest development between us to the rise of a subgenre I like to call “stressed-out single mother horror.” Granted, obsessive, dangerous mothers have been big since the horror renaissance of the ’70s. Jason’s vengeful mom is actually the one behind the hockey mask in *Friday*, and the late Mrs. Bates is arguably the agent of violence in the genre-setting *Psycho*, though channeled through her sociopathic son Norman. Anyone who’s seen *Carrie* will tell you it’s the ruthless, religious fanatic mother who pushed her telekinetic teen to the satanic prom night bloodbath.

But a new maternal demonic force shines in some of the more impressive scary movies of late, the best example being last year’s Australian masterpiece *The Babadook*. The film weaves nighttime fear of the supernatural with emotional terror, tracing the story of a stressed-out single mother and her son, who fears the titular monster. Through art film-level cinematography and pacing which may just win over the genre opponent, it is the mother who turns out to drive the Babadook’s haunting of their house; the broken family is

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restored only when they finally acknowledge their suppressed grief over the long-dead father.

My mom and I have now watched *The Babadook* three times together, and once apart. It's become one of our standards. We can gush for hours about the sublime editing and storytelling moments that gave us the chills. And in the end, this seems to suffice. The emotional pangs and twisted family dynamics that so resonate with us in the movie can go comfortably unspoken. We watch a protagonist on the edge of a nervous breakdown be consumed by unseeable mania, tear her domestic life apart at the seams, then purge her rage through the power of a mother's love; then we can pretty much call it a day.

They don't churn out smart psychological horror as much as one might hope, so I was pretty excited to see Austria's newest cerebral-torture flick *Don't Tell Mommy*. The movie follows a household's descent into madness when a mother comes home from facial reconstructive surgery and her sons fear she is not who she seems to be. Not a perfect film but one I would recommend to the brave of heart. When I confessed to my mother on the phone that I'd seen it without her, I concluded my in-depth review with a plucky "You'll like it—it's about a stressed-out single mother!"

Even without voicing the unvoiceable "—like you" at the end, I realize this joke might not go over as such in most families. But it is our biggest family inside joke in the moments where we once-estranged two most closely resemble a family. Household instability; dark threats invisible to others; possession by forces outside of one's control—these are basically what every horror movie is about. It might be nice to hear my mother address these horrors out loud, apologize for past hurts and for haunting our house, and heal our shared possessive illness. But it may also be enough just to be with her and let someone else in the room do the addressing for us. If that person is a horrified babysitter on screen, covered in red paint and hiding in the closet, I don't really see what's wrong with that. The trauma is real enough, so the faker the blood the better, actually. Before we inevitably cry together over the universal dread of never overcoming it all, I'm hoping we can scream a bit too.

# Moral Robots

Elisabeth Huh

Is there a best way to live? In *The Most Good You Can Do: How Effective Altruism Is Changing Ideas About Living Ethically*<sup>1</sup>, moral philosopher Peter Singer announces there is a key to living the most fully ethical life, and it turns on a simple principle: do the most good you can. Known internationally for his 1972 essay, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” and for his foundational work in animal rights philosophy, *Animal Liberation*, Singer has seized upon his intellectual capital in this newest work to advocate for effective altruism, what he defines as “a philosophy and social movement which applies evidence and reason to working out the most effective ways to improve the world.”<sup>2</sup>

Elisabeth Huh is a third-year in the College majoring in Fundamentals.

1. Peter Singer. *The Most Good You Can Do: How Effective Altruism Is Changing Ideas About Living Ethically* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

2. Ibid., 4.

Like many of Singer’s works, *The Most Good You Can Do* is polemical. Some reviewers, such as Stanford Medical Professor Walter M. Bortz, have written fervent panegyrics lauding Singer as “the voice of our collective conscience...our moral compass”<sup>3</sup> and his book as “a miracle grow tonic”<sup>4</sup> for your brain. Others, such as John Gray of *The New Yorker*, deems the effective altruism movement one of the “follies of philosophy,”<sup>5</sup> and Judith Lichtenberg of *The New Republic* expresses concern for the way his arguments “distort human psychology.”<sup>6</sup> The crux of most of this controversy circles around his longstanding philosophical claim: that we must ignore feelings and personal preferences to make correct moral decisions and live the most ethical lives. This argument is evidenced from Singer’s praise of Matt Wage, a former student whom he upholds as a paragon of effective altruism. After his acceptance to Oxford for postgraduate

3. Bortz, Walter M. “Dare to Be 100: Peter Singer’s Mighty Voice.” *Huffington Post*, June 2, 2015.

4. Bortz, Walter M. “Dare to Be 100: Book Review: Singer, *The Most Good You Can Do*.” *Huffpost Books*.

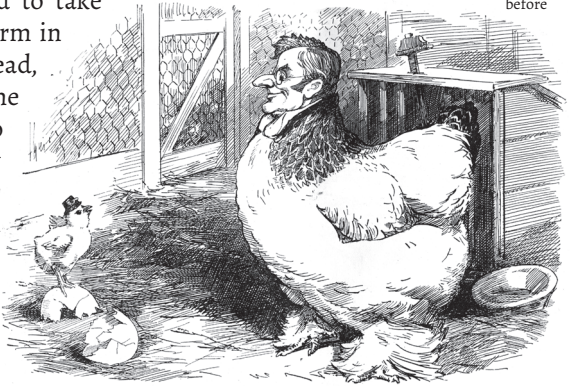
## MORAL ROBOTS

I never saw so much expression in an inanimate thing before

5. Gray, John. "How & How Not to Be Good." Review of Peter Singer's *The Most Good You Can Do: How Effective Altruism Is Changing Ideas About Living Ethically*, by Peter Singer, New York Review of Books, May 21, 2015.

6. Lichtenberg, Judith. "Peter Singer's Extremely Altruistic Heirs." *The New Republic*, November 30, 2015.

study, Matt decided to take a job at a trading firm in Wall Street instead, believing that he would be able to do more good by earning a higher income than a typical philosophy professor. Singer argues he made the right choice:



*One year after graduating, Matt was donating a six-figure sum—roughly half his annual earnings—to highly effective charities. He was on the way to saving a hundred lives, not over his entire career but within the first year or two of his working life and every year thereafter.<sup>7</sup>*

7. Singer, 6.

Singer adds later in his book that we ought to admire effective altruists not only for the positive consequences of their actions, but for their integrity. He contrasts Matt's decision with that of another hypothetical student who chose instead to accept an offer for graduate school, to write a thesis on *Beowulf*, and to become a professor of medieval literature. He explains that if this student also held the conviction that we ought always to try to do the most good we can, her selfish pursuit of her own passions would have cost her her ethical integrity.<sup>8</sup> Singer argues that the most ethical individuals substitute reason in the place of emotion. While Singer does believe individuals should take advantage of their unique skills and talents, he urges all those who wish to do good in the world to rationally consider the probability of saving lives through paths such as academia as long-shots.<sup>9</sup>

9. *Ibid.*, 66.

Singer presents the career strategy of "earning to give," on the other hand, as a safe bet and as an objective good. That is, as long as we give to the most effective charities. Singer praises how effective altruists resist giving to "whatever cause tugs most strongly at their heartstrings" to maximize their positive impact.

He warns against donating to highly ineffective but emotionally compelling charities such as the Make-A-Wish Foundation, which fulfills the wishes of children suffering from life-threatening illnesses like Leukemia. He laments how a donation of \$7500 spent to fulfill one child's wish "to be Batkid" for a day could have been put to far better use by the Against Malaria Foundation to save the lives of three children. As a utilitarian, Singer's philosophical arguments run through a moral calculus that takes on what nineteenth-century philosopher Henry Sidgwick would call "the point of view of the universe."<sup>10</sup> He distills complicated ethical choices into simple, objective consequences, weighs the newly-commensurable outputs, and produces what appear to be self-evident moral claims: "Saving a child's life has to be better than fulfilling a child's wish to be Batkid."<sup>11</sup> According to Singer, the emotional pleasures we derive from certain actions (such as putting a smile on a sick child's face) hinder optimal ethical decision-making; our emotions often divert us from the path towards the good.

10. Henry Sidgwick. *The Methods of Ethics* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2012), p. 185.

11. Singer, 6.

To be clear, I do admire Singer's decades-long crusade against all forms of suffering. I admire his unrelenting efforts to push a background of inequities into the consciousness of the rich, to force them to wrestle with the weight of privilege, and to question whether they can fully digest their expensive purchasing decisions while seated at a global table serving others suffering and starvation. I also firmly agree that we all ought to broaden our sphere of moral concern and do all we can to alleviate needless suffering. But Singer is no moral saint; and I feel disquieted by his cult-like following, and by a number of insidious problems in his theory of moral progress. Singer's extreme views make him an easy target for criticism, but my primary aim is not to echo frequent arguments against utilitarianism or to repeat the other common concerns of his critics. I am interested in examining the phenomenon of Peter Singer. I want to investigate the reasons for his popularity, and I will try to do so by examining the philosophy of his philosophy; I want to discern what he presupposes as the measure of moral truth and the key to societal progress and to explain how these assumptions fit within a zeitgeist that looks fondly upon individualism, scientific rigor, rationality, and empiricism. I believe that upon close inspection,

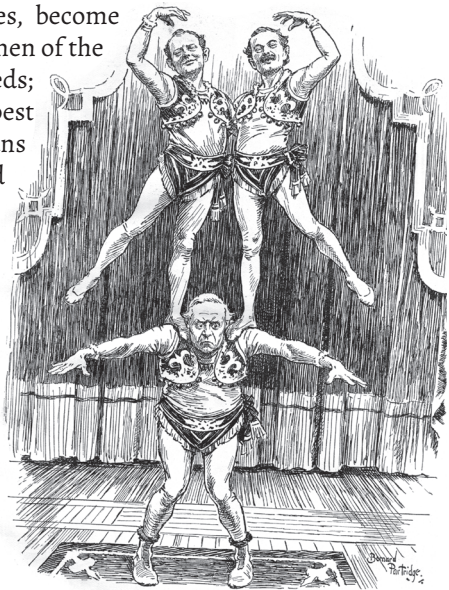
## MORAL ROBOTS

Singer's philosophy runs with rather than against the current of many of our society's problematic cultural and ethical values. I worry that this course is what may lead us morally astray.

The phenomenon of Peter Singer strikes me as an ancient Platonic dialogue unfolding on a contemporary stage. Singer himself is something like a modern Socrates; he practices frugal living, probes at the public's unquestioned habits with eccentric arguments, and philosophizes like a stinging gadfly—waking his fellow citizens from the lulling comforts of moral complacency. His efforts to influence the public through reason also recall Plato's theory of human motivation, illustrated by his conception of the tripartite soul. In Book II of *The Republic*, Socrates explains that the root of each human desire can find its origin in one part of a three-part soul: the lowest part, *epithumia*, motivates the appetites and the desire for bodily pleasure; the middle part of the soul, *thumos*, desires honor and a competitive form of self-interest; and the highest part of the soul, *logos*, loves reason and knowledge.<sup>12</sup> Socrates explains that the size of each of these three parts varies among individuals, but that the largest piece of each person's soul naturally guides her into one of three social classes. The majority of the population, motivated by bodily appetites, become the moneymakers and craftsmen of the city and fulfill its basic needs; those who desire honor are best fit to serve as the guardians and warriors of the city; and philosophers, whose actions are ruled above all by reason, ought to rule.

The most just city, according to Plato, is one ruled by a philosopher king—it is a city that models itself after a perfectly ordered soul. The limited supply of philosophers, and the utter dearth of any

12. Cooper, John M. "Plato's Theory of Human Motivation." *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, Vol. 1 (1984): p. 15.



Still I will proudly declare that there is something queer about it.



possessing the skill or desire to rule, posed to Plato a perpetual obstacle to justice. Singer's appearance, however, seems to mark a shift in this historical paradigm. By teaching an increasing number of ethically percipient individuals to live modestly, eschew the glory of personal wealth, and orient their lives by the light of his rational moral principles, Singer manifests, in some ways, Plato's socially conscious philosopher king. Just as the ideal philosopher king would strive to guide his city to justice through his unique understanding of the good, Singer implores the public to create a more just world by adopting his representation of the impartial perspective of the universe while making moral decisions.

So is Singer our philosophical messiah, or our modern-day Socrates? Not quite. For the few, yet essential, differences between Singer and Socrates indicate some of the most questionable qualities in the newer model's philosophy. Socrates questions, Singer pontificates. Socrates insistently professes his ignorance, while Singer exudes utter confidence. Socrates is willing to question his own assumptions and employs a dialogical form of reasoning, responsive to the principles, emotions, and concerns of his interlocutors; Singer's understanding of "reason" is surprisingly narrow—divorced from all telluric concerns, and deferential to only a few absolute principles.

This approach appears infallible so long as these principles are truly correct. So Singer dares the polis to examine his arguments and find any reason to object to his axioms: suffering is bad, and if we can do something to prevent suffering without comparable cost to ourselves, we should. If we assent to these principles, as Singer asserts any rational person aspiring to goodness should, he then beseeches us to respect elementary math and apply its logic to his arguments in order to live the most ethical lives possible. The conclusion, he believes, is obvious: the greater number of lives we save, the more ethical we become.

Singer argues that the entire history and future of humanity's moral progress depends upon our willingness to accept his arguments. Citing Yale Psychology Professor Paul Bloom, Singer argues that it is not possible to widen our empathy indefinitely to

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embrace all of humanity as our common family. He argues that instead of hoping to stretch our emotional empathy, which often leads us astray, we should instead recognize through reason that the lives of strangers hold the same value as the lives of those we love. We should numb our emotions to the images of crying children disseminated by ineffective charities and focus on identifying the most efficient means of giving. In this way, Singer argues we can subvert David Hume's famous dictum—we can enslave our emotions to our reason, and then enjoy a rational swell of satisfaction after they have served its righteous commands.

Singer also cites the research of Steven Pinker's *The Better Angels of Our Nature* to impute the overall decline in daily violence over the course of human history to the development of our higher reasoning capacities. Indeed, Singer depicts the most prominent adherents of effective altruism as exemplars of evolved human moral psychology, describing how they are deeply "sensitive to numbers,"<sup>13</sup> how they

13. Singer, 78. "talk more about the number of people they are able to help than about helping particular individuals,"<sup>14</sup> and how they tend to have

14. *Ibid.*, 89. expertise in areas requiring abstract reasoning, like mathematics or computing. Applauding their critical outlook towards bias and emotion, Singer upholds the effective altruists' particular mode of reasoning—predisposing them to determine the good through hard, empirical data—as a gift, aiding their recognition of deep, moral truth.

But is the key to humanity's moral progress truly impartiality and empiricism? Do these two qualities constitute the essence and pinnacle of human reason? In his book, Singer aims to convince by giving examples of effective altruist reasoning: if effective altruists have \$10,000 to donate, he states, "they would rather give it to a charity that can save a life for \$2,000 than one that can save a life for \$5,000 because they would rather save five lives than two."<sup>15</sup> It is

15. *Ibid.*, 78. the profit-maximizing sentiment embedded within Singer's highest moral principle, "Do the most good you can," that motivates my primary objections. Though Singer provides examples of a few other "ethical careers" people can pursue—as policymakers, organizers, advocates, researchers—he also explains that the good any individual can achieve in these fields is less predictable, and thus less



thoroughly effective. He implies these options are inferior to the pursuit of a high-income career that could finance large-scale donations to demonstrably efficient charities. Singer's demand for undeniable efficacy irons his unobjectionable, loose-hanging motto, "Do the most good you can," onto the back of a more determinate directive: "Give away the most money possible." How the money is obtained is largely irrelevant: those who earn more can simply do more good.



One of the major pitfalls then, of this moral doctrine, is that it champions capital as the ultimate instrument for ethical good. By heeding the logical maxims of effective altruism, figures like Bill Gates and Warren Buffet become the altruists who live the best ethical lives simply by virtue of their higher capacity for maximally impactful financial giving. If everyone were to fully accept this logic, the result would be pernicious: our social hierarchy, already largely determined by wealth, would acquire an additional ethical justification. Those who suffer from systemic injustices, discrimination, or other societal forces of inequality would receive little aid or compassion, for the effective altruist's moral doctrine would mandate that they overlook middle-to-low classes as truly mediocre individuals whose suffering from a removed, universal perspective would be negligible. The most wealthy altruists would not only be perceived as the most powerful, but the most ethical and good. For in this system of thought, beneficence becomes the preeminent ethical virtue. Courage, creativity, compassion, and other virtues necessary for reforming systemic problems or healing complicated ailments, such as racism, xenophobia, or mental illness, become valueless atavisms.

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The other issue at stake is the question of the very nature of ethical living, and whether or not ethics can be reduced to a system or to a set of determinate principles. If so, moral philosophy simply consists of their identification and application. But is it possible to discover a perfect moral decree? And even then, if we spent our entire lives obediently following its perfect code of instructions—regardless of the content of our own sentiments and beliefs and reasoning processes—could we truly become maximally ethical?

A major problem with Singer's conception of ethical living is that it requires that we mechanize ethical thinking. It turns over our ethical deliberations to the processing of a machine—programmed to maximize the reduction of suffering and to overlook the value of anything outside of this simple injunction. This is the moment, I argue, where the greatest threat of evil and wrongdoing arises: when our reason simply ministers to an unquestioned absolute. Hannah Arendt is famous for observing this phenomenon—what she called the 'banality of evil'—while describing Adolf Eichmann's behavior during his trial.<sup>16</sup> Arendt describes her horror listening to the listless old man defend his service to Hitler with mindless stock-phrases and clichés: he did his duty, he only obeyed orders, he was just following the law.<sup>17</sup> Arendt argues that this is the true terror of evil: that it comes not from sadistic, evil masterminds, but from the unexceptional, from the common-place, from those who become convinced to do something once and who do not stop to ask questions in their quest to fulfill their objective.

16. Hannah Arendt. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. (New York: Viking Press, 1963).

17. *Ibid.*, 27.

Singer's unfaltering allegiance to his own principles leads to alarming conclusions we cannot let pass unquestioned. To demonstrate the correct application of his principles, Singer provides a scenario in his book where an effective altruist has the option to donate \$100,000 to a local art museum or to an organization restoring vision to victims of trachoma in developing countries. While I, and most, would probably agree that it is better to donate to cure the blind, Singer's own defense of this option verges on absurdity. He states:

*Suppose the new museum wing will cost \$50 million, and over the fifty years of its expected useful life one million people will enjoy seeing it*

*each year, for a total of fifty million enhanced museum visits. Since you would contribute 1/500th of the cost, you could claim credit for the enhanced aesthetic experiences of one hundred thousand visitors. What if you donate to cure blindness? ...a donation of \$100,000 could be expected to restore or preserve the sight of one thousand poor people in developing countries. On the one side, then, we have enhanced aesthetic experiences for one hundred thousand museum visitors, and on the other side we have one thousand people spared fifteen years of blindness, with all the problems that that causes for poor people with no social security.*<sup>18</sup>

18. Singer, 119.

If Singer is aware of the problems in this argument and intentionally seeks to persuade through hyperbole, then few can single him out for this political use of rhetoric. But if Singer sincerely believes he can perfectly reduce the value of a donation to an art museum to the “enhanced aesthetic experiences” of a certain amount of people, commensurate with the size of the donation, we ought to reflect on the problematic values underlying his deeply flawed reasoning. We also ought to reflect on the types of people that might find these arguments convincing.

Singer’s philosophy aims to eliminate uncertainty through quantitative reasoning. His arguments, therefore, appeal especially to those who want to make absolutely correct ethical decisions and who detest uncertainty. They resonate for the increasing number of people who perceive numbers and empirical evidence as the ultimate standard-bearers for rigor, seriousness, and truth. Singer has tapped into the heart of the values of science and capitalism to create something like a new secular religion, promising that anyone can achieve maximal goodness by simply buying into his efficient brand of ethical living. His book explains whether effective altruists should have children (though they suck money away from other suffering people, they are a great investment if you also raise them to become effective altruists); he gives examples of cheap or free hobbies altruists can adopt for fun and fulfillment; and he advises how to manage a budget that settles just above the point of marginal utility.

In a world of suffering and inequality, Singer argues that those

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who wish to live by his doctrine should consider art museums as nothing more than buildings offering “aesthetic experiences.” But by contrasting the value of an “aesthetic experience” with the value of saving a life, Singer falsely represents the value of museums and overlooks the essential role that art plays in a great number of lives. What of autistic individuals who use art as their primary means of communication? Or those who sell or create art for a living? What about the millions of people whose experiences and reflections in an art museum might have helped them to perceive the world in new ways, perhaps inspiring new ideas and projects that then helped to shape the world? The fact that the impact of an art museum is not easily quantifiable does not mean that it does not have important value. Just because a smaller population may consider art essential does not mean its value is objectively negligible. The dichotomy Singer creates between “objective” physical needs and “subjective” experiences treats our need to fill our lives with subjective content as frivolous fluff. Singer asserts that from the perspective of the universe, an art museum holds no value outside of aesthetic experience, that subjective experiences are selfish and unimportant, and that anyone who disagrees with him is objectively wrong.

So I object to his logic, even if that makes me “objectively wrong,” for I believe that even if we accept the salience of numbers and impartiality in areas like science, we should reject that ethics should work in the same way. We should reject the notion that we can quantitatively determine the most serious forms of suffering through an algorithm, and that ideal moral thinking should consist of nothing more than our pursuit of this end. I wholeheartedly protest against the



This paper looks to me as if it KNEW what a vicious influence it had!

claim that we should only help those who are “objectively” the worst off, and that we are undoubtedly better off when we strain every effort to alleviate suffering through the sieves of certainty and efficiency. For if these claims are true, we should outsource our moral thinking to robots, who are truly best fit to act as perfect moral agents. If Singer is right, we should define humanity’s distinct capacity for ‘moral reasoning’ as nothing more than the recognition of logical principles, the cognitive capabilities required for mathematics, and the thinking required to maximize efficiency.

But is Singer right? Is the key to moral progress truly greater objectivity and impartiality, and should we aspire to be more like robots? I think not. For I believe the human reason that drives moral progress does not lack individual, subjective content; this content is what imparts its human nature. I believe we should actually look to Wittgenstein—a philosopher who notoriously denies the existence of all objective, absolute, or metaphysical truths—for some of the deepest insights into how ideal moral thinking should operate. In his *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein argues that the role of philosophy is not to make discoveries or unveil absolute truths by means of pure logical rules; rather, it aims to understand meaning by surveying our use of language in our everyday lives.<sup>19</sup> The philosopher Cora Diamond shows how Wittgensteinian thinking applies to moral philosophy in her analysis of Plato’s dialogue, *Crito*.<sup>20</sup> In the *Crito*, Socrates argues that he should not escape from prison because we all ought to obey our parents and teachers, and if he escapes, he will be disobeying the state of Athens, which has been his parent and teacher. An absolute or formulaic conception of moral reasoning would argue that Socrates’ moral argument consisted of finding a general moral rule or principle—it is wrong to disobey our parents and teachers—by making a statement of fact—that the State is his teacher—and finally, by generating his moral decision—it is wrong to disobey the State—by applying fact to principle. Wittgenstein would object to this interpretation, however, for it asserts that philosophy should simply be used like math or logic to discover an answer to a problem already objectively fixed in advance.

Diamond presents an entirely different take on this situation. She explains that Socrates’ moral thinking did not simply consist

19. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte, rev. 4th ed. (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

20. Cora Diamond, “Missing the Adventure: Reply to Martha Nussbaum,” in *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991).

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in identifying fixed logical truths, and that he did not merely state objective facts. She argues that Socrates employed startlingly original moral thinking in describing Athens as his “parent” and “teacher.” In testing the boundaries of the words “parent” and “teacher,” Socrates reframed the facts of the situation at hand to transform Crito’s own moral perceptions. Applying his own interpretation of fact to a general understanding of right and wrong, Socrates also took on full, subjective responsibility for his moral decision. Socrates did not use philosophy like a lantern to discern some objectively correct course of action, pre-written on some metaphysical moral plane, he fused his own creative, subjective deliberation into his use of reason to present what he considered the right thing to do.

Socrates also exhibited sensitivity to Crito’s feelings. Crito beseeched Socrates to flee from prison out of compassion for his friends and children. Socrates responded, not by denying the validity of Crito’s concerns, but by acknowledging that he shared Crito’s essential moral intuition—that it is wrong to treat others badly—and by then showing how this same value justified his own decision: he should not escape because it would do harm to Athens. Socrates uses this point of agreement as a pivot to shift Crito’s perspective, to share his own beliefs, and to explain his disagreement in terms he hopes Crito can empathize with and understand.

We cannot, and should not, seek to wholly eliminate subjective thinking or the emotions from our moral thinking, for these are essential elements of human existence that we ought not to scorn as unimportant or undesirable. The emotions manifest human values, cultivated by our experiences, constitutive of cognitive processes, and shaped by our reason. We feel grief at the loss of something we had cherished and loved; we fear that which poses a threat to our understanding of well-being; we feel anger when we sense injustice and wrongdoing. Though Singer does not go so far as to claim that effective altruists ought to completely strip away their emotions, he does insist that the emotions distract from his principle of efficiency, and that this principle is essential for optimal moral decision-making. So this is what I consider his ultimate mistake: it is his conflation of morality with efficiency, and his belief that we do not need the emotions and some acceptance of uncertainty on our

path to moral progress.

Why is this a mistake? Let's look at the legalization of gay marriage in the United States. Singer's effective altruist doctrine would have maintained that the suffering of homosexual couples was not as great as the suffering of those starving to death, and that, therefore, "maximally effective" altruists wishing to do "the most good" possible should not have considered spending any time, money, or resources fighting for some the right to some highly subjective form of emotional fulfillment.

Yet a great number of individuals "defied" reason and logic by listening to their hearts anyway. They fought for what the perspective of the universe might consider a completely selfish, emotional, and subjective form of self-betterment—and the result was a landmark sign of social progress. The right to same-sex marriage was unscripted—it was not a victory activists could have definitely predicted in advance—and its value would have been difficult to quantify (although, I suppose, some could argue married homosexual couples make more money, enjoy certain tax and welfare benefits, and raise happier children, and then total the sum of that eudaimonistic calculus). Still, the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges* recognized the salient desires of homosexual couples, and they reached this decision through moral reasoning.

In his decision, Justice Kennedy described marriage, not as a strict legal relationship between a man and a union, but as a lifelong union "arising from our basic needs," "essential to our most profound hopes and aspirations," and promising "nobility and dignity to all persons."<sup>21</sup> He did not discover this definition while reading through the dictates of absolute moral law, but by listening to the moral language of the human beings before him beseeching a new form of understanding. It was through listening to their arguments and feelings that Kennedy was able to declare, "It would misunderstand these men and women to say they disrespect the idea of marriage... They ask for equal dignity in the eyes of the law. The Constitution grants them that right."<sup>22</sup>

21. *Obergefell v. Hodges* 576 U.S. 3 (2015).

22. *Obergefell v. Hodges* 576 U.S. 28 (2015).

This is the end towards which I believe morality progresses—the



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recognition of universal human dignity. It is the recognition that we each have unique preferences, beliefs, desires, and dreams, and that these human needs deserve universal respect. The compassionate and imaginative mental work necessary to reach this recognition—and not our unthinking adherence to fixed rules or principles—is what distinguishes human reason. We ought to reflect upon the etymology of the Greek word *logos*, which refers not only to “reason,” but “word,” “speech,” and “opinion.” There is a grammar and a logical structure underlying the language of morality, but this is set into place by shared human values, needs, and experiences. Our willingness to work through this shared grammar in order to hear, debate, disagree with, and understand those who think differently from ourselves is what fuels the engines of political change and moral progress.

The reasoning of effective altruism is incredibly useful for those who possess the equivalent of a truck-load of band-aids and seek to identify where this general aid can provide the most urgent help. Yet charitable giving alone cannot heal unhealthy minds, reform insidious systemic or structural injustices, or lend a human ear to those who suffer from disrespect, discrimination, and the overall loss of their dignity. Singer arguments have garnered him impressive political capital: his mastery of the language of objectivity and empiricism has allowed him to speak to the values of a growing number of people. But it is wrong to believe that his arguments align with absolute truths. It is wrong to believe that we should deafen our ears to calls for help that do not speak with the weight of empirical urgency.

Efficiency, impartiality, and logical consistency are virtues of math and science that should not continue to carry the same valence in the sphere of ethics. We can never discover an absolute ethical system; and we do not make moral progress by spurning humanity in the pursuit of some perfection above ourselves. We use ethics and moral philosophy to try to understand how to live well, and we make continual progress by listening to our humanity—by perpetually struggling to amend our rules and systems to fit a constantly changing, eternally imperfect, and unalterably human form of existence.



## Keeping Things Whole

Danny Licht

Things are changing at a rapid pace. Broadly speaking, the world today appears quite different from how it did yesterday, with six new rides and a sleek new look, and everyone is talking about it; tickets are sold out for the next month and a half. It seems to me that what has prompted these sudden alterations (though frankly I am no expert here) is that I have been reading a large book by Søren Kierkegaard,<sup>1</sup> which I both can't recommend enough and can't recommend at all, as I will try to explain to you. It is a book that leaves its readers nothing to hold onto, with no great plot and no clear theme. If some illuminated path runs through the book, then somehow I missed it, making the book less like an oracle, whose riddle might save me (if only I could crack it!), and more like architecture: a life-size building constructed and furnished by its generous author. I have spent the past

several months living with this book, with its language and attitudes and parables before me, seducing me, submerging me completely. Now I can say, without hesitation, that I like the book, I do, but I can hardly say what I have learned from it.

Its power comes not from what it is—as a set of concepts, or a heavy object, or my plus-one to recent events—but from the way

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1. Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. Alastair Hannay (Cambridge 2009).



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that it has warped and mangled the very color of everything.

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On a breezy day in April, the campus bloomed with prospies and I was looking for a place to sit on the quad. I passed a group of them, all wide-eyed and beautiful, and I thought about when I was one of them, in a simpler time. “Oh!” someone cried. It was their docent, and she had our attention:

*Another thing I want to tell you about Harper is that on the second floor you can find our Study Abroad offices, where you can learn all about our opportunities to study abroad in a ton of different countries. Most people do their Civilizations Core when they go abroad—that’s our history sequence—but last year I actually studied in Paris to fulfill my Biological Sciences requirement. So I was getting my bio requirement out of the way while I got to be in Paris, which is fun.*

These closing words hit me sharply, and they have stayed on my mind since that afternoon. The docent did not say she liked Paris for this or that reason; she did not even admit that it was *she* who found it fun. No, the way she described her experience made it sound as though she had buckled up on a certain Six Flags roller coaster that goes by the name of Paris. Certainly, she did not intend for it to come across this way, but the language she used (the same as the University’s marketing department) nevertheless brings to mind an attitude towards programs that sees the very click of attendance as its ultimate aim. *Go to the University of Chicago, which is a good school. Study philosophy, which law schools love. Choose Paris, which is fun.* This type of outlook plops activities into objective categories, wherein the pursuit of individualized experience seems to become a kind of rebellion. The College and its courses have the potential to function as dynamic settings that promote an individual’s discovery of a unique situation within the world. By contrast, the theme-park mindset consumes Paris and its objects, preventing participants from experiencing them purely as “experiences”. I hope there is some meaningful difference between studying abroad and Study Abroad, and I wonder if it might be possible to advertise the latter without obscuring the former.

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When we talk about personal experiences such as living in a foreign place, it can be difficult to convey the essence of actually being there to people who want to know about it. As a consequence, we often resort to tropes we have heard other people say, phrases like “It was fun!” and “I definitely don’t *regret* going.” These valuations hardly express any of the experiential value of actually going to a place, living there, and experimenting with a new way of life. They instead express exchange-value. They reduce experience to a quantity of social capital. I am afraid the epithets we stick onto certain experiences at some point start to reshape our ideas of the experiences themselves. These reductive valuations usher individual adventure underneath the glow of the epithet, which creates a special new form of adventure—one with an itinerary.

Should a lonely night present itself to a Paris participant, a feeling unfamiliar to the topic’s discourse, she might shudder with disbelief: “Am I in the right Paris?” Repeated expectations such as this one haunt many new college students, for example, who feel they have not received their promised fun or have not made lifelong friends in eight weeks. I remember feeling concerned last winter that I did not yet have a simultaneously broad and deep understanding of the world. *Does that happen in fifth week, or is it sixth?* When program participants and officials discuss their opportunities with the direct language of advertising, they develop myths that encourage future participants to believe that Paris equals fun, and to count on it, which leaves them little room for individual, subjective experience.

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Something about my encounter with the propies reminded me of a conversation I had overheard a few months prior in a store downtown. “Sweetheart,” a mother explained, “shorts that short are *just* inappropriate.” Her daughter replied, “Did you see that thing online the other day that said the most active police of what women wear isn’t actually men but other *women*?” The mother delivered a punch line: “Really? Is that *true*?”

I wanted to laugh, except it was hardly funny. From where I stood, it seemed that the personal message the daughter wished to convey

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did not go through at all. Instead of empathy or understanding, the mother seemed to receive a neat little fact. “Anyway,” she went on, “why don’t you try on the top we picked out?”

It seemed that the fault of miscommunication fell on both ends. The daughter did not speak clearly of herself and her personal relationship with her mother, but instead of “women” and “what women wear,” as though these were categorical subjects of the world at large. Her mother received the message as it was delivered, an observation about this group called Women, and so her daughter’s expression of immediate, personal interest turned into a factoid—it was lost.

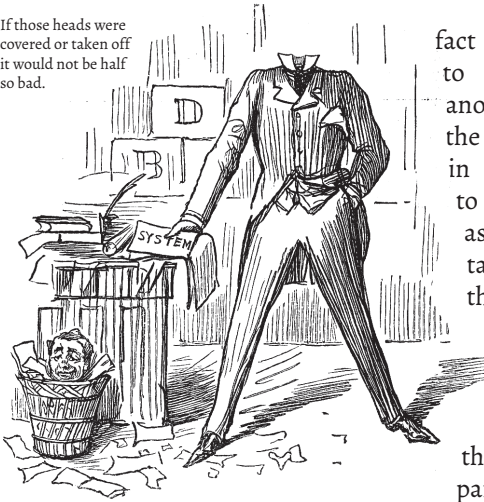
The communication of complex emotion finds itself among all other essentially personal matters, such as love, belief, and point of view, which cannot be expressed like a list of bands you like, a recipe for bouillabaisse, or a structural account of capitalism. We can convey those things with direct, systematic language that has little ambiguity. But how can you communicate, for example, what it means to love someone, or what it means to be a student? How can you help your mom understand that her judgment, regardless of intentions, stifles you? Certainly not with abstract language, as we have seen, but also not, I suspect, with direct or systematic language.

Imagine if the daughter had instead told her mom, “The male gaze you’ve inherited and push onto me is making me neurotic and limiting my ability to choose who I want to be!” I think her mother would have responded defensively, because her intention here was only to be helpful. Being aware of this intention likely encouraged her daughter to wrap her feelings with a safe, taut surface, which enabled her mother to skip above them with objective delight. Here the mother and daughter were not simply using different words; they were speaking different languages.

In a related way, the tour guide’s Paris-ergo-fun may have moved her followers to choose this school or that program, in the same way that Yelp rankings might move you to choose one restaurant over another, but the reduction of Paris to a few words says nothing at all about the experience as an individual process, or about the

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If those heads were covered or taken off it would not be half so bad.



fact that the work of going to school and living in another country is not in the decision to attend, but in the individual's ability to understand herself as an individual and to take responsibility for the person she wants to become. Paris-which-is-fun surrounds the program with a brand of language that confers upon it a particular kind of value

that has nothing at all to do with you or me. It is a way of speaking that hides individuals from the freedom of their possibilities. It is a way of living that is selected from a brochure.

I can still feel the wrath that Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life* laid upon Los Angeles, my hometown, in 2011, like a biblical plague. I remember my parents' friends, industry people, warning a crowd: "It's unwatchable!" and "Don't waste your time! We walked out of it last week, and so did the Spiegels!" Rex Reed of *The Observer* called it "138 minutes of the kind of pretentious twaddle that makes critics slobber and audiences snore."<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Turan of *The Los Angeles Times* wrote,

*But the truth is, unless someone tells you that you are watching, for instance, what is supposed to be the formation of the universe or the day in the distant future when the sun becomes a white dwarf, there is no way to know exactly what you are seeing. It is, unfortunately, characteristic of this meditative and elliptical film that it is simply not possible for rank-and-file viewers to know as much about it as Malick does.*<sup>3</sup>

Such was my rebellion, then, to watch this terrible movie. And in

2. Rex Reed, "Evolution, In Real Time! Terrence Malick's Ponderous 'The Tree of Life' Ponders the Meaning of Existence," *The Observer*, 24 May 2011.

3. Kenneth Turan, "Movie review: 'The Tree of Life,'" *The Los Angeles Times*, 26 May 2011.

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many ways, its critics were right. The movie is quite unlike normal movies. Reed continues, “Is there a plot? Well, no. I mean, maybe. That is, sort of.” There is a plot, somewhere, maybe even two or three or five of them, but they are chopped up and rearranged and tucked among each other, transforming the experience of watching the film into a bewildering parade of visions: chaos, cosmos, dinosaurs, Brad Pitt, old trees, a walk through the desert. Throughout the film, the audience wonders why the hell this endless crawl into adulthood got interrupted by fragile pretty lights and huge cosmic bodies and prehistoric reptiles. Wikipedia attempts a synopsis:

*The film chronicles the origins and meaning of life by way of a middle-aged man’s childhood memories of his family living in 1950s Texas, interspersed with imagery of the origins and eventual demise of the universe and the inception of life on Earth.*<sup>4</sup>

4. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Tree\\_of\\_Life\\_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Tree_of_Life_(film))

Yes, this is what the movie is about, maybe, or maybe what it is, in a certain sense, but *The Tree of Life* has no essential plot, and the word “interspersed” makes the “imagery” sound like decoration, as though it were somehow less part of the movie than the scenes with the famous people. For me, the thrust of this movie lies not in its plots or its imagery or even in their relationship, but somewhere else entirely.

Somewhere in the middle of the movie, the neighborhood boys throw rocks and break windows and attach a frog to a rocket they send into the sky. One of them yells, “Did it go to the *moon*?” They are proud of this triumph, this blow to nature, and they look around wildly towards one another. But when the others are not looking, at least a few of them seem uneasy. With odd dignity, someone cries, “It was an *experiment*!” as though to justify the act, loudly, using this common language of science and existence. But for whom, and to whom, is he giving the explanation?

At the beginning of the film, the mother advises in voiceover, “The nuns taught us there are two ways through life: the way of nature, and the way of grace. You have to choose which one you’ll follow.” For the next couple of hours, Malick proves it. Here is nature, aggressive and desperate, and here is grace, loving and

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gorgeous. What are we, the viewers, to do with all these moments, all this imagery? Is the film completely obvious? The mother is happy because she does not want; the father is spiteful and so he suffers. A very thorough exegesis of the film—one that connects its images and sounds to that original dichotomy, an altogether critical account that leaves no frame unmentioned and no whisper unconsidered—would nevertheless be a misguided attempt at understanding this highly unusual movie. Such an attempt might give its unfortunate reader (who would have likely turned to it after struggling for hours to understand, for the life of her, why the good jurors of Cannes could have possibly awarded this ridiculous, plotless film the superlative Palme d'Or, and the Rubensteins will be arriving within the hour!) the impression that she has, at last, a solid grasp on the movie.

The moments of the film work not as plot points but as sensations. A boy dies and his mother weeps; a father teaches his sons to fight; convicts pass by in chains. One scene shows a mother clipping laundry outside to dry. The sun casts her shadow on bedsheets; hose water moves over her pale, bare feet. In direct contrast to this serenity, her husband then scolds their son at dusk as they walk through the yard. He points to dead grass and asks why it is bare. "Grass won't grow under the tree," his son explains. "It does at Kimball's," their neighbor's, the father replies.

As interpreters, we are bound to wonder how this strange montage up on the screen relates to its theme, but its theme is only its beginning. This wondering is shaped ineffectively. When we ask what the film "means," we imply that the film is only as much as it has to tell us. We imply that there is an upper limit on the possibilities of experience, when what makes *The Tree of Life* at once groundbreaking and a masterpiece is that it is not contained within itself. It is a movie that understands at the deepest level its essential relationship to its audience. Its director seems to know that the viewer does not take a pause from existing when she walks into the movie theater. Movies tend to be chewed on briefly and digested with ease. This one, without a plot and all but inscrutable, refuses to go down so easily. The film's ambiguous process of pain, wandering, loneliness and anxiety imitates the indeterminate form of life itself. It allows the viewer, in adopting these moments as her own, to adopt the

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film's questions as her own: How will it end? What of this matters?

Were *The Tree of Life* edited in chronological order, in the shape of a plotline and without the imagery, it would yield a considerably different effect. Narrative, which is catharsis, can move us to release our latent desires; it can help us cope with living. But narrative cannot change our lives. When you learn a story, you are already familiar with its basic structure, because narrative runs with the grain of cultural mythology. It stays on the screen, or in the book, or in the mouth of a friend. "Life is complicated," we learn at the finale. "Okay, great. Now what's for lunch?" The meaning of the essentially personal cannot be expressed in plot points, and when we distribute narrative experience on stylish pamphlets, our readers will buy in or they will not, and they will return to their evenings exactly as they arrived.

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I went to Hebrew school twice a week for seven years, reluctantly, a preteen unbeliever. The other day, while I was making breakfast, cracking two brown eggs into hot, trembling oil, it hit me that I know nothing of Judaism and that I also believe in God. For all the years I spent learning about the Bible and its personalities, about the rites of Passover and the work and rest of God, I am not sure I ever wondered whether or not I believed in God, whether or not I was Jewish, and whether or not this might matter to me.

When I talk about "bar mitzvah," I talk about it in the sense of "before" or "after my bar mitzvah," or to refer to a specific kind of party. In fact, and amusingly to me, the phrase means "son of commandment" (I had to look this up). If I were to speak faithfully to the term, I would talk about "becoming" a bar mitzvah, a man of God's word, more than I would of "having" one or "going to" one. Instead, I speak faithfully to what took place: I had a bar mitzvah without ever becoming one, though I did look a lot like one and sound a lot like one, and if you gave me a minute to think, I could recite from memory eight or nine of the Ten Commandments. Then, after dinner, I could do the same with my Core requirements.

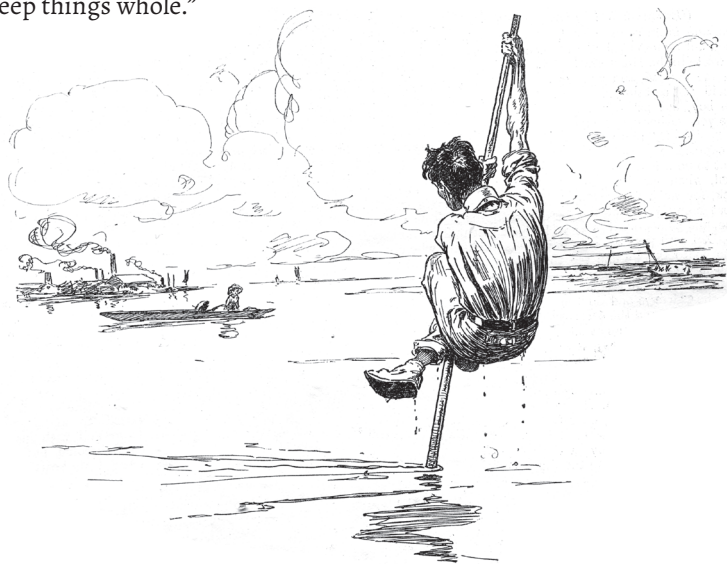


## DANNY LICHT

Now that I have decided I believe in God, I wonder what it would mean to know the commandments more intimately. "Knowing and knowing is not always the same thing," as Freud put it. I wonder how much my upbringing of bagels and lox and chanting the V'ahavta alongside my grandparents, which are things I once sincerely thought were the most Jewish imaginable, has to do with this enormous religion of Rabbi Heschel and Martha Nussbaum.

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There is a poem by Mark Strand that begins: "In a field / I am the absence / of field. / This is / always the case." I think Kierkegaard would have hated it. The speaker is there, at the synagogue, or he is there, at the movies, or he is there, at the other end of the Atlantic Ocean, trying out Paris, going everywhere everyone says to go. He tells his friends back home that, yes, it is fun, just look at these photos. They reply, together, "Yes, we know!" Even still, he has this nagging sensation that he can hardly admit, and it will not go away. He knows Paris is fun, and he sees Paris is fun, and he wants Paris is fun, but everywhere he turns, he finds he is missing. "We all have reasons / for moving," it ends, the darkest words I know. "I move / to keep things whole."



I know well  
enough  
that a step  
like that is  
improper  
and might  
be miscon-  
strued.



# SPRING 2016

Volume 11, Issue 3

Rebecca Segall

humanizes horror

Elisabeth Huh

evaluates ethics

Danny Licht

ponders possibilities

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