



laetus in praesens

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7 April 2014 | Draft

Being neither Dead nor Alive

But how to know now?

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Introduction

As the title implies, the question raised here is the extent to which one experiences oneself as more dead than alive -- or is so considered by others. As the subtitle implies, the further question is how the current state of society enables one to make that distinction -- given the questionable nature of "one" and the potential meaning to be associated with "now".

How do such questions relate to the ideals of *life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness*, as embodied in the *United States Declaration of Independence*? Does the sense of being alive relate to the experience of happiness or rather to some more profound and inexplicable engagement with life? What meaning will the future associate with "being alive".

Consideration of such questions may be usefully framed by the argument of [Barbara Ehrenreich](#) (*Smile Or Die: how positive thinking fooled America and the World*, 2009). Has "being positive" become associated with "being alive", and "being negative" with the contrary? Is this framing suggestive of the vulnerability of society to a cognitive analogue to diabetes as a consequence of the persistent quest for information "sweeties" as being unquestionably appropriate?

Such concerns raise questions regarding the art of governance in challenging times, given the widespread indications of social unrest -- and more to come. With the current framing, is there a fundamental issue of ungovernability (*Ungovernability of Sustainable Global Democracy?* 2011). More provocatively, the only possibility for "governability" may be through the catastrophic reduction of complexity. In terms of the focus of this discussion, does this imply some combination of dumbing down, deadening, or treating as dead -- effectively to minimize any sense of being alive as it may engender and sustain dissatisfaction and social unrest? Expressed otherwise this might be framed as cognitive "container management". As pursued with respect to herds of wild animals, this has long taken the form of "taking out the stallions" as being a source of leadership threatening humans in nature's wilderness.

More personally, the argument raises questions as to how dead one is, or how alive -- and how to know? More generally the question is how to "enliven" what is dead under social conditions where every effort may be made to "deaden" what is alive.

The argument here develops some points partially made separately (*Metaphors To Die By: correspondences between a collapsing civilization and a dying person*, 2013) as a complement to the framing offered by [George Lakoff](#) and [Mark Johnson](#) (*Metaphors We Live By*, 1980).

Being alive -- or considered alive

There is ready agreement regarding people experienced as "alive" and "full of energy". Less clear is the variety of attributions of such qualifications -- or of the contrasting sense that a person is "dead". There is a delightful charm to considering the conditions under which

one feels alive or is considered by others to be so in some special sense. What is "feeling alive" and any special sense of having "never felt more alive"?

Happiness? Is the focus especially on one of happiness -- perhaps to be associated with joking, laughing, cheering, dancing -- even of rave parties -- or their metaphorical equivalents?

Excitement? Is it a matter of thrills and excitement -- especially those involving unusual risks? Can it be exemplified by the engendering of adrenalin and endomorphins, and especially by sexual intercourse?

In communication? These point to the sense of being alive as associated with some form of collective communication of which social networking is now a primary reality for many. Is "being alive" a matter of "being connected" -- of "being in the loop", or of being "known"? Is it simply the sense of being in meaningful communication? To what extent does the very dependency on such connectivity imply a form of "death"? Is it to be considered a form of "life support" -- an umbilical cord -- or even a "communication teat"?

Appreciation? More subtly, is it a question of being appreciated by others -- through the acknowledgement of applause and followers -- thereby recognizing that one is alive? Is it a resonance with the inspiration offered by others which engenders a sense of being alive in some way?

Humour? Appreciation of humour, and of being humorous, offers a special sense of feeling live "now", especially through participation in it in collective dialogue. As such it has a vital integrative function in the moment, transcending conventional boundaries, as discussed separately (*Humour and Play-Fullness: essential integrative processes in governance, religion and transdisciplinarity*, 2005).

Future understanding? As noted above, a particular challenge is consideration of how the future may understand "being alive" in any contrast to "being dead". How have such understandings evolved over past centuries? Such speculation may be extended further by considering how extraterrestrials might frame the question and any answer, as partially explored separately, especially with regard to communication of any such insight (*Self-reflective Embodiment of Transdisciplinary Integration (SETI): the universal criterion of species maturity?* 2008; *Communicating with Aliens: the psychological dimension of dialogue*, 2000).

The challenge is all the greater if being human comes to be understood in terms of waveforms, as separately discussed (*Sensing Epiterrestrial Intelligence (SETI): Embedding of "extraterrestrials" in episystemic dynamics?* 2013; *Being a Waveform of Potential as an Experiential Choice: emergent dynamic qualities of identity and integrity*, 2013). Indications in this respect continue to emerge, framed in terms of the purported existence of longitudinal scalar waves (*Konstantin Meyl, Longitudinal wave experiment after Nikola Tesla*, 2014; Bill Morgan, *Scalar Energy: a completely new world is possible*, Rense.com)

Being dead -- or considered dead

Experience of being dead: There are clearly many conditions under which people experience themselves as "dead" -- or are considered to be so by others. Most common is the sense of deadening employment, if only that experienced as "deadly boring". More extreme are those conditions in which one's identity is subtly destroyed, as in various forms of what may be experienced as slavery, whether bonded labour or a domestic environment -- and especially their marital and sexual variants. This sense of deadness may encourage suicide as a curious "registration" of the condition.

Framed as dead: Also evident is the sense in which people may be effectively framed as "dead" -- or potentially so -- whether by those who consider them to be of no consequence, or by those who are initiating their elimination. Variants are evident in the framing of some as effectively sub-human. Examples include descriptions of clients, voters and spectators as "sheep" or "cattle" -- potentially to be targetted, possibly in order to "make a killing".

Some may be described as "dead from the neck up" or "from the head down" (in tragic contrast to those affected by some conditioning rendering them so). Aging may lead to being framed in this way by younger generations or -- more tragically -- by relatives, especially if there is pressure for institutionalization in anticipation of physical demise. Those in mental asylums may be framed in a similar manner -- especially with respect to any experience of others that there is effectively "no one inside", as in a description by [Ronald Laing](#) of a patient suffering from chronic schizophrenia. This is discussed separately with respect to its potential collective analogue (*Collective Memory Personified: an Analogy*, 1980).

An extreme example, which is a focus of myth in all but a few cultures, is reference to the "undead" of some kind -- notably to [zombies](#) ([Brad Steiger](#), *Real Zombies, the Living Dead, and Creatures of the Apocalypse*, 2010) This may be strongly associated with a belief in ghosts -- the "reality" of which is most evident in real estate valuation of [houses reputedly "haunted"](#). Related inferences may be made regarding those held to have "dead eyes". There are many popular events (noted by the media) celebrating zombie culture and the "living dead", as notably analyzed by [George Ritzer](#) (*Islands of the Living Dead: the social geography of McDonaldisation*, *American Behavioral Scientist*, 2003). Enthusiasm for this mode has been seen as a response to the psychosis of modern society -- and an appropriate reflection of its monstrous condition.

Perhaps more generally, any post-traumatic distress may be experienced as a form of "living death", notably as a consequence of rape and torture. The term provides a "language for psychosis" ([Andrzej Werbart](#), *The "Living Dead": survivors of torture and psychosis*, *Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy*, 1993). For [Norman Cousins](#): *Death is not the greatest loss in life. The greatest loss is what dies inside us while we live.*

Officialdom, in the form of bureaucracy, may be caricatured as the "living dead". The point has been made otherwise by [Philip K. Howard](#) who argues that: *American Democracy is basically run by dead people* (*The Rule of Nobody*, 2014). By this is meant that the important decisions made by government have been preset in legal concrete by statutes and regulations written in past generations and not altered for decades. So framed, the argument is presumably relevant to the situation in many countries. There are many web

references arguing that: *The United Nations is dead*. Clearly such arguments are to be expected with respect to other institutions.

Such questions can be related to concerns regarding the "dead hand" of authority, of centralized control, and of the past (Nigel Farage, *The Dead Hand of Bureaucracy*, 2012; Arthur Corbin, *The Dead Hand of the Common Law*, *Yale Law Journal*, 1918; James Q. Wilson, *The Dead Hand of Regulation*, *National Affairs*, 1971; Gordon Graham, *Political Philosophy and the Dead Hand of History*; James Block, *The Dead Hand of the Present: is a future possible?* *Huffington Post*, 28 August 2013). The latter argues:

We are blinded from seeing this process of spiritual desiccation by the built-in demands of the system to unceasingly mobilize and focus our energies in the chase for survival and status. So absorbed in our own pursuits, we can each convince ourselves that we are pursuing a viable life plan. We can further conclude by extension that we like everyone else... are participating in a system that promotes the effective mobilization of resources and achievement.

Rendering dead: A sense of deadness may be tragically associated with neural and other damage through which one or more limbs may be experienced as "dead" -- echoing the temporary experience of anaesthesia. Potentially experienced as equally tragic is estrangement in relationships -- most notably with respect to friends and relatives -- possibly exemplified by the dramatic phrase "you are now dead to me".

At what distance, however understood, are others considered to be effectively dead -- given that they cannot be experienced as alive? This enables them to be framed as objects, subject to any "instrumental logic", through which their physical death becomes a matter of indifference? (*Indifference to the Suffering of Others: occupying the moral and ethical high ground through doublespeak*, 2013).

The process of targetting, as notably framed by military strategy, may effectively "pre-define" individuals or groups as "dead" -- in anticipation of the action which will "make it so". Given the subtitle of this argument, how can one now know whether one has been so framed? More generally, does irresponsible or negligent strategy effectively condemn many to a probable early "death" of unknown form -- possibly only in the eyes of others -- and of which they are not aware?

Cultural death: There is of course a degree of awareness of the many dead civilizations (*Top 10 Civilizations That Mysteriously Disappeared*; Robert E. Anderson, *The Story of Extinct Civilizations of the West*, 2012) and of dead (and dying) cultures, most notably as evident in the disappearance of those using the languages which characterized them (*List of extinct languages*; *List of endangered languages*). Curiously the process of civilization may ensure the death of culture, as separately argued (*Flowering of Civilization -- Deflowering of Culture: flow as a complex experiential dynamic*, 2014).

The many dead gods of those civilizations offer another indicator -- potentially of the collapse of the value systems they symbolized (Patricia Turner and Charles Russell Coulter, *Dictionary of Ancient Deities*, 2001; Michael Jordan, *Encyclopedia of Gods: over 2,500 deities of the world*, 1993; H. L. Mencken, *Where is the Graveyard of Dead Gods?*).

With respect to the envisaged collapse of the current global civilization, the point has been sharply made in a widely-commented article by Roy Scranton (*Learning How to Die in the Anthropocene*, *The New York Times*, 10 November 2013):

The biggest problem we face is a philosophical one: understanding that this civilization is *already dead*. The sooner we confront this problem, and the sooner we realize there's nothing we can do to save ourselves, the sooner we can get down to the hard work of adapting, with mortal humility, to our new reality.

The issue can be presented otherwise through the question as to whether the future will use criteria framing the current civilization as indeed already dead -- perhaps "brain dead", despite what might be recognized as forms of "life support" for a civilization in a "persistent vegetative state". This would be consistent with recognition of the evidently questionable capacity of the [global brain](#) to care for civilization in a sustainable manner. By the same criteria, the citizens of such civilizations might be assessed as essentially "dead" -- as has been evident to a degree in colonial occupation.

Dilemmas: confusion and possible mystification

Ambiguity: Some of the above examples suggest a degree of ambiguity, whether of experience or interpretation, as to being "dead" or "alive". Other cases can be cited to highlight this ambiguity:

- **Killing:** The process of killing another person, or an animal, has been frequently described in terms of the thrill it offers -- an affirmation for the perpetrator of being alive. The profit motive thrives on the metaphoric notion of the possibility of "making a killing" -- a possibility inspiring many business endeavours. "Slaughtering the opposition" is similarly valued, especially in politics -- as with the excitement of "slaughtering competitors" in sport. Do the security services protecting such as Obama on their travels to promote democracy experience a special sense of "being alive" in the face of the death threats -- and their obligation to "take a bullet" if required? Does Obama?
- **Abusing others:** There are many examples of such abuse: bullying, humiliation, torture, etc. Again the perpetrator may derive a sense of being especially alive during that process. Those experiencing such abuse may well recognize a corresponding deadening of their individuality -- as notably evident from declarations of those subject to sexual abuse by clergy. This is widely exemplified by feminist arguments with regard to the abusive treatment of women as sex objects and the lifelong impact on victims of rape.
- **Loved to death:** The phrase is readily recognized in terms of its suffocating effects on the loved one. The argument has been

developed by George Monbiot (*Loved to Death*, *The Guardian*, 8 April 2014) with respect to ethical panels dominated by major corporations:

At their best, these corporate-dominated panels are mostly useless: preening sessions in which chief executives exercise their messiah complexes. At their worst, they are a means by which global companies reshape politics in their own interests, universalising -- in the name of conquering want and exploitation -- their exploitative business practices. Almost every political agent -- including some of the NGOs which once opposed them -- is in danger of being loved to death by these companies.

- **Suspended animation:** At the time of writing, the issue of [suspended animation](#) was highlighted by Helen Thompson (*Suspended between Life and Death*, *New Scientist*, 29 March 2014):

Neither dead nor alive, knife-wound or gunshot victims will be cooled down and placed in suspended animation later this month, as a groundbreaking emergency technique tested out for the first time... "We are suspending life, but we don't like to call it suspended animation because it sounds like science fiction..."

- **Cyborgs:** Rapid advances in artificial intelligence and its support in a variety of interfaces, raise issues as to the extent to which such artefacts are to be considered "alive" in any meaningful sense of the term -- as opposed to "dead", as they could be readily defined to be. The dilemma can be explored in terms of dialogue potential with artificial entities, as separately discussed (*Forthcoming Major Revolution in Global Dialogue: challenging new world order of interactive communication*, 2013). It can also be explored in terms of the extent to which common professional modalities can be usefully compared to that of cyborgs (*Cyborgs, Legaborgs, Finaborgs, Mediborgs: meet the extraterrestrials - them is us*, 2013). Framed in this way, it may then be usefully asked as to the extent to which one is oneself a cyborg under certain circumstances -- or treated as such. More dead than alive? Given the increasing dependence on cyberconnectivity, is the society of the future likely to be a "cyborg society" -- bearing a degree of comparison to that of the fictional [Borg society](#) of the *Star Trek* series?
- **Drone operation:** The increasingly widespread use of [drones](#) to target individuals and strategic locations raises the question as to how both the operators and potential targets are to be framed with respect to "being alive" and "being dead". With respect to the potential targets, the point has been made above. With respect to the operators, do they experience an increased sense of "being alive" as a consequence of "taking out" a target -- as in any video game?
- **Online and video gaming:** As variously noted above, this offers the thrill of virtual combat intimately associated with feeling "alive". It is noteworthy that some rehearsing mass shootings have used such games to prepare themselves for the reality of the experience (*Gruesome but Necessary: Global Governance in the 21st Century? Extreme normality as indicator of systemic negligence*, 2011). It is well-recognized that such games are used as training facilities for combat troops.
- **Sacrificial engagement:** Much is made of the heroism of those who sacrifice themselves in combat in which their own death is highly probable (Battle of Britain Spitfire pilots, kamikaze pilots, etc). Clearly there is a degree of ambiguity to the sense of being "alive" in the moment and the awareness of imminent "death" -- or its probability.
- **Risk of death:** There are many examples of sports (and forms of employment) in which the risk of death is integral to the value associated with the experience. This is most evident in the case of extreme sports in which the quest is for an "adrenalin rush". This may be more commonly recognized in dangerous driving.
- **Drug dependency:** For those using [psychoactive drugs](#), these clearly offer a sense of "being alive" -- possibly reinforced by the sense of "feeling dead" prior to the stimulus of such usage or thereafter. The stimulus may be considered the key to the experience of pleasure. For others, those dependent in this way may be framed as "dead" -- especially given the ambiguity of the expression "being stoned" (*Enstoning through Imagination, Dreams, Drugs and Imbibing*, 2012). The argument may be usefully broadened given the degree to which significant proportions of the population depend on medication of some kind -- and are therefore effectively on "life support" through such usage. Medication may be vital to deadening pain, whether physical or otherwise. There is some irony to the use of "deadening" to reduce any sound made by others -- therefore including their expression of pain.

Dead and dying organs: Many are confronted at some stage with the "death" of their own organs, whether through aging, accident or disease. Cells may be recognized as dying (or pathologically alive), as in the case of cancer. The loss can be traumatic in the most fundamental sense, most notably in paraplegia and any loss of control of the nervous system -- evident in progressive loss of memory and dementia. The situation is of course more ambiguous in the case of hair and nails which may anyway be treated as "dead" and deliberately cut off. Teeth may be treated as similarly dissociated from the body. Modification of the body through [cosmetic surgery](#) implies related assumptions. Worth noting is the strange illusory sense of the "life" of an absent organ, namely the [phantom limb](#) experience.

Being "dead to the world": This phrase is typically restricted to those who are asleep -- perhaps indicated by snoring. It may also include those in a vegetative state. Of greater relevance to this argument is reference to the "unawakened" and the metaphorical challenge of "awakening". This is a primary focus of spiritual development and -- in a more diluted form -- of education in general. There is then the implication that the ignorant are essentially dead -- yet to realize the potential of being fully alive. Since ignorance is necessarily relative, such implications can be readily denied. The ambiguities are delightfully illustrated by snoring and its denial (*Snoring of The*

Other: a politically relevant psycho-spiritual metaphor? 2006).

Being "deadly boring" or being "dead bored": As noted above with respect to employment, many jobs may be experienced as "deadly boring". This experience is not limited to jobs, but may apply in other contexts, including patterns of relationships and lifestyles. The elderly, the young, and those variously institutionalized, may experience their context as "deadly boring -- with some explicitly recognizing the possibility of "dying of boredom". By contrast, individuals experienced as "deadly boring" by others may well experience their social interactions as the reverse -- exemplifying for them a sense of "feeling alive". Those responsible for a behavioural context, as in the case of an enterprise, may believe it provides a sense of "feeling alive" through offering "something to do". The issue is relevant to the psychosocial dimensions of sustainability, namely the challenge of how interest and motivation are sustained over time -- without degrading into boredom. This is curiously analogous to the economic challenge of sustaining the profitability of any initiative -- attending to the risk of it becoming unprofitable.

Embodying "living truth" or being "dead wrong": A special significance is attached to "living truth" and any capacity to embody it. This could well be understood as intimately associated with the sense of "being alive" and "feeling alive" as an expression of that truth and a consequence of its realization. It is typically religions who accord significance to truth in those terms as being fundamental to their belief system, to the characteristics of its exemplars, and to the lifestyle it engenders. Conflicts emerge when others uphold other truths by which they live -- or none at all, as in the case of **unbelievers**. The expression of alternative truths is then perceived as fatal, even embodying dangers justifying the severest sanctions. Common use of the phrase "dead wrong" is then especially appropriate given the fatal dynamics to which such conflicting perceptions so obviously lead.

Curiously those upheld as embodying living truth are considered to be necessarily "right" -- even "upright" -- despite the manner in which they are challenged by others who are then necessarily "wrong". The inability to encompass and affirm the living truths of others suggests that any associated sense of "being alive" may be constrained in the absence of understanding of a higher order. This suggests a useful interpretation of being "dead right".

Remaindering: Some of the ambiguity of the examples cited above may be fruitfully understood in terms of how boundaries are artificially defined to distinguish categories. This may be understood as opportunism -- a form of "conceptual gerrymandering". That which is framed as "beyond the pale" is then effectively "remaindered", as separately discussed (*Reintegration of a Remaindered World: cognitive recycling of objects of systemic neglect*, 2011). This raises the question of the nature of the system from which some elements are included and others excluded. The issue can be highlighted in the case of personal claims that some regretted past behaviour was "not me" -- namely with which one does not consciously identify.

Symbolism indicative of paradox?

Dead products: Given the degree to which the sense of "being alive" is associated with self-expression and creativity, this argument could be understood as a concern with how this is increasingly displaced by the focus on the product of the creativity of others or the past. Any finished product is then experienced as "dead" to some degree, thus reducing the sense of being alive to the manipulation of forms of deadness -- engendering and reinforcing a sense of "being dead".

Summitry: A striking symbol of the complex relation between "being alive" and "being dead" is offered at the time of writing by the visit of Barack Obama to a NATO-EU summit in Brussels. As the world's ultimate embodiment of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, the visit required 900 support and security personnel (*Barack Obama's first visit to Brussels to cost Belgium more than €10m*, *The Guardian*, 24 March 2014; *Are you watching Vladimir? Obama lands in Belgium with entourage of 900 and 45 armored vehicles for ONE night*, *Mail Online*, 25 March 2014). Citizen-taxpayers were witness to an impressive array of overflying helicopters, rooftop snipers, and neighbourhood lockdowns -- presumably coordinated via a flock of invisible drones.

The question is whether Obama is then to be considered as symbolizing "alive" or "dead" -- potentially or otherwise. Despite an international media blackout regarding the security implications of the visit, citizens were witness to an impressive cortege of what could be readily perceived as armoured hearses conveying celebrants to the funeral of a **Cosa Nostra** godfather. How was this to be understood as exemplifying "life", rather than a massive exercise in "life support" for an individual assessed as vulnerable to premature death and presumably in the greatest fear thereof? Should Putin riposte on the next occasion with a 1000-person entourage in 50 open vehicles -- as an indication of his fearlessness?

Given the exploitation of the mountaineering metaphor by use of "sherpas", summitry might benefit from consideration of the classic surrealist novel by René Daumal (*Mount Analogue: a novel of symbolically authentic non-Euclidean adventures in mountain climbing*, 1952).

Exemplars: Framed in this way, it can then be asked whether various triumvirates enabled aliveness or deadness. Instructive exemplars might then include in historical order: Nixon/Kissinger/McNamara, Bush/Cheney/Rumsfeld, and Assange/Manning/Snowden. With respect to the last triumvirate, it is appropriate to note the efforts to "deaden" their implication in some way -- if not literally (*Would Jesus Now be Prosecuted by US? Like Manning, Assange and Snowden*, 2013).

Are the first two triumvirates to be considered the embodiment of death (Vietnam, Iraq), and the last as the embodiment of life -- with the curious consequence of the impunity of the former and the punitive justice sought for the latter?

Cut flowers: Summits and similar events are typically the occasion for extensive displays of flowers in order to enliven the settings. Since use is typically made of cut flowers for this purpose, the practice can be explored as illustrative of the paradoxical relationship between what has been killed and its use to symbolize "being alive" -- through a lingering implication of "life that was". This argument has been developed separately with respect to summitry (*Flowering of Civilization -- Deflowering of Culture*, 2014).

Nautilus: The paradoxical ambiguity between "being alive" and "being dead" is metaphorically reminiscent of the inner shell produced by

a living mollusc. In some cases this takes the elegant form of [nacre](#), namely an organic-inorganic composite material which is strong, resilient, and [iridescent](#). More frequently, rather than nacre, the inner layer produced by the living mollusc is [porcellaneous](#), usually resulting in a non-iridescent shine.

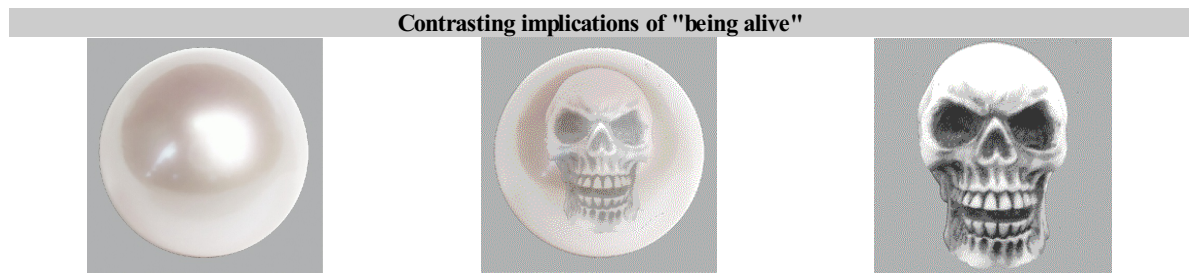
Nacre is characteristic of the [marine nautilus](#) whose spiral structure is valued as emblematic of desirable educational development and of strategic appropriateness ([New Zealand Curriculum Nautilus](#), [Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainable Development](#)). The form can be used to order Chinese insights into the patterns of change ([Designing Global Self-governance for the Future: patterns of dynamic integration of the netherworld](#), 2010).

Pearl: dead or alive? Nacre is typical of the attractive outer coating of a [pearl](#), produced by some molluscs and associated with wisdom and transcendental truth (Theodore Bogdanos, *Pearl: image of the ineffable*, 1983). Although "dead", pearls are widely described as being "alive" -- especially through being worn. However their harvesting typically results in the death of the mollusc which produced them. Appropriate to the ambiguity is the manner in which "pearl of wisdom" may be used to deprecate and mock the insight of others. What pearls of wisdom were engendered at the NATO-EU summit in response to the annexation of the Crimea -- the "pearl of the Russian Empire", as described by Catherine the Great?

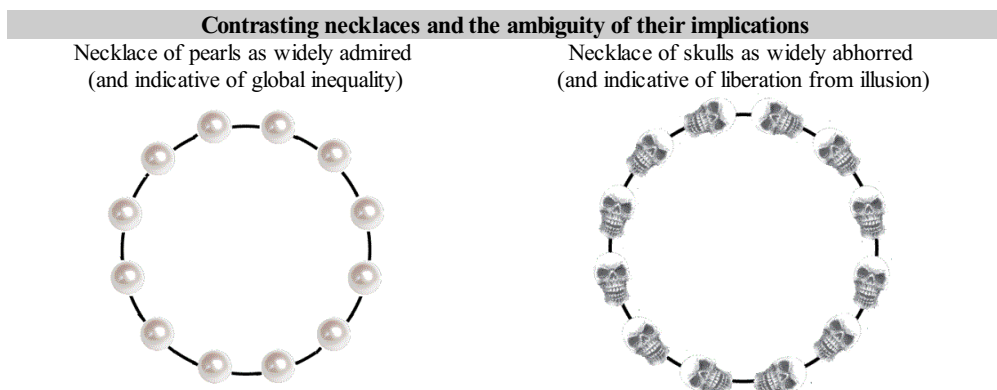
Whether iridescent or not, spiral or not, the product of the creativity of the living mollusc is readily to be understood as more dead than alive. It may indeed be held to imply wisdom, wealth and beauty, and the eternal quest for them -- as widely celebrated in the Chinese [dragon dance](#) (Helmut Nickel, *The Dragon and the Pearl*, *Metropolitan Museum Journal*, 1991). The decorative art of China, including temples and traditional folk dances, focuses extensively on the theme of two such dragons -- usually depicted facing one another in the air in eager pursuit of a spinning pearl floating like an iridescent bubble between them. This theme was a mark of books issued under imperial auspices. The pearl in this context was of great symbolic significance to Taoists.

The pearl is central to the Christian [Parable of Pearl](#) in which it is indicative of the great value of the [Kingdom of Heaven](#) ([Matthew 13:45-46](#)). As the focus of a quest, it bears a strong relationship to the continuing significance associated with the [Holy Grail](#) ([In Quest of Sustainability as Holy Grail of Global Governance](#), 2011).

It may also be intimately associated with evil, as notably argued in fictional form by [John Steinbeck](#) (*The Pearl*, 1947) -- the focus of extensive commentary.



Implications of life: Pearls are commonly worn in the form of a necklace and are much sought and valued for that purpose. Pearl rosaries are also made as [prayer beads](#) as one form of mnemonic aid ([Designing Cultural Rosaries and Meaning Malas to Sustain Associations within the Pattern that Connects](#), 2000). One common form of [rosary](#) has 50 beads; number vary in other traditions. A garland of some 50 or more skulls is characteristic of the depiction of the Hindu goddess [Kali](#) (symbolizing liberation, knowledge and wisdom). The skulls are variously associated with the letters of the Sanskrit alphabet or of those liberated from illusory identification with the body and the hypnotic tyranny of birth and death.



The engendering life essential to sustaining processes is not to be found in the explicit patterns -- however elegant -- engendered while "being alive" and "feeling alive". The essentially dead products can only imply the living meaning by which they were engendered.

Pearls are emblematic of the transformation of a problem for a living entity into significance of another order of "global" form -- a challenge into an opportunity. Does the current civilization have the capacity to transform its problems into "pearls"? The spiral form of the marine nautilus, within which a pearl may be found, itself offers a meta-pattern whereby patterns of change can be fruitfully encoded (as noted above).

Could every product of human creativity be fruitfully considered as a nacre-covered pearl? More provocatively, do cultures and

civilizations collapse when completely "naced" -- complementing the sense offered by its better known homophone?

Curiously such products are increasingly subject to intellectual copyright restrictions. This was highlighted by the difficulty in locating an image of a skull -- free of such constraints -- for the purpose of the above illustrations. Coincidentally the quest occurred at the time of extensive media coverage of commemoration of the [Rwandan Genocide](#) of 1994 -- figuring arrays of skulls of the 500,000 to 1,000,000 slaughtered during a 100-day period. The image finally used was made by photographing a plastic reproduction of a skull.

Pearl of wisdom embodying living and dying?



This is not the Earth
(as highlighted by [surrealism](#))

Systems perspective in the light of animal husbandry

Containers: The dilemmas in distinguishing whether one is "alive" or "dead", become more evident in considering and comparing the containers within which any such sense is experienced. Especially intriguing are the degrees of similarity between the experience in the following seemingly quite disparate containers -- to the point at which, in abstract terms, only a few parameters might well distinguish that experience wherever those containers are evident:

- a hotel room, especially as experienced by frequent and jaded travellers
- an apartment, especially one of smaller size -- a studio apartment
- an office, especially one designed or partitioned for maximum efficacy
- a prison cell, especially of a type characteristic of countries with enlightened penal conditions
- a hospital room, especially one provided for private patients
- a hospice room, especially one designed to resemble a studio apartment
- a monastic cell, especially when offering some small amenities rather than those of a hermitage
- an assembly line position
- a vehicle driving position ("behind the wheel", "in the cockpit", etc)
- a passenger position in a vehicle (bus, plane, etc)
- a classroom or lecture theatre
- a supermarket

Cocooning: Having behaviour contained in this way can be considered in the light of so-called [cocooning](#). This has been perceived and framed as an ideal of residential life -- the ultimate container experience. As defined from a marketing perspective by [Faith Popcorn](#) (1992):

... cocooning is about staying home, creating a safe place around you, the gardeners being the barrier, between the garden and the alarm systems being the barrier, filtration systems for water and air, working at home ... every inch of it you have, you have some of this... how many days can I work at home?

One experiential response to "being cocooned" is a sense of claustrophobia, of suffocation and of entrapment. Such terms may well be ascribed to behavioural containers -- where any walls are invisible. This is most commonly encountered in the case of marriage and employment. The examples cited, especially when framed in terms of cocooning, could be understood as indicative of the living conditions of many.

Systems perspective: In considering the limited number of parameters which might define and distinguish the above containers, the argument could be reframed from a systems perspective to include those characteristic of [intensive animal husbandry](#) (chickens, pigs, cattle, sheep, and the like) -- necessarily recalling the allegorical presentation of [George Orwell](#) (*Animal Farm*, 1945). In generic terms, processes and issues include:

- distinguishing entities within the process by quality (heritage, genetics, susceptibility to disease, etc), age (maturity)
- marking, registering or certifying entities according to qualities and norms
- calculation of benefits and "profitability" to the contextual system
- consideration of the welfare of the entities, whatever ethical principles are considered relevant
- training (whether framed as socialization, education, conditioning, subjugation or domestication)
- "culling" of any form to mitigate against overpopulation, possibly framed according to eugenic principles
- inhibition of reproduction, whether through some form of [castration](#) or prevention of interaction between entities capable of it
- channelling the entities through stages and processes (especially evident in stockyards, supermarkets, etc)

- "harvesting" the entities, however this may be understood
- nourishing the entities to ensure their continuing viability

From a systems perspective, the principles applied in the management of the "entities" in one type of container could well be applied in others -- again with minimum change to parameters. This is especially evident as a consequence of movement of entities from one type of container to another, in each of which different processes may be enabled -- as with the interlinked containers in a factory of any kind.

It is from the perspective of any such context that further insight might be obtained as to whether the inhabitant of the container is "alive" or "dead" -- whether as experienced by the inhabitant (through constraint on possible patterns of behaviour) or as that experience might be framed and perceived by others (by comparison with other environments).

Behaviourally caged animals? A useful pointer to whether the inhabitant of a container is alive is provided by the caged animals in zoological gardens. They may well be technically alive in physiological terms but be unable to express the behaviours which characterize their identities in their natural environment (courtship, migration, reproduction, etc), especially the collective behaviour through which forms of intelligence are demonstrated (flocking, etc). More dramatically this is evident in the transition from "alive" to "dead" through the stages of slaughterhouse procedures and animal experimentation.

With respect to humans as "entities", the comparison with caged animals is especially indicative in the case of those imprisoned or entrapped, however this may be understood -- possibly including enhanced interrogation designed to terminate in death. This raises the question whether Nelson Mandela had been effectively and deliberately rendered "dead" over 27 years -- and the current examples offered by Bradley Manning, Julian Assange and Edward Snowden. These are perhaps to be contrasted with those implicated in "massacres", however these have been reframed as justified by some higher cause.

The argument from a systems perspective is consistent with the application of "management" principles and procedures to the processes associated with disparate entities and contexts (animal management, office management, crop management, prison management, environmental management, etc).

Somewhat ironically, "management" can itself be suggestively deconstructed as "man-age-ment", namely the organization of the aging process of humans -- perhaps, ironically, to be understood as planned obsolescence. The case of those imprisoned "for life" is also instructive. Being treated as "dead" by society, and unable to express what previously characterized their identity, should they indeed be so considered?

Categories as containers: from cargo cult to container culture? With respect to this argument, there is a sense in which categories function as containers for a living experience, variously explored as the [container metaphor](#) by [George Lakoff](#) and [Mark Johnson](#) (*Metaphors We Live By*, 1980). The issue is whether and when the container, through definition, effectively deadens that experience by engendering identification with it rather than with the experiential process it represents.

More generally there is the question of how that experience is somehow transferred and transformed through a succession of containers -- as in any industrial process -- then to be understood as processing experiential reality and making of it a commodified product. This is consistent with recognition of the commodification of identity and the warning to consumers: *if it is free, you are the product*. This nuances the meaning of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Given the manner in which [cargo cults](#) have been deprecated and mocked, there is then a case for asking whether the current global civilization has echoed cognitively its reliance on [intermodal containers](#) for transportation -- perhaps best to be understood as engendering a "container culture".

Information flow. For any entities, however contained, a sense of aliveness could be associated with the manner in which information is experienced as "flowing" or "circulating" within that context -- whatever that might be most usefully understood to mean. Deadness might then be readily associated with highly constrained and limited information flows -- characterized as "programmed" experience.

Any dilemma regarding the sense of being alive or dead might however then be better understood in terms of wave-like experience, as separately argued (*Being a Waveform of Potential as an Experiential Choice: emergent dynamic qualities of identity and integrity*, 2013). The issue would then be one of shifting over time between such determinations. Experience in an office may reinforce a sense of being "alive" at some moments and "dead" at others -- perhaps in a confusing, unpredictable and inexplicable pattern (*Living with Incomprehension and Uncertainty: re-cognizing the varieties of non-comprehension and misunderstanding*, 2012; *Living as an Imaginal Bridge between Worlds*, 2011).

Conditioning: Understood in terms of information, especially relevant is the degree to which [conditioning processes](#) can be used to convince an entity of its "aliveness" or to reframe that appreciation. Relevant indicators include:

- systematic [dumbing down](#) as is characteristic of the media under marketing and political pressures
- cultivation and promotion of particular processes as of primary significance (religion, gambling, sport, substance consumption, etc)
- deliberate spinning of news, as practiced by governments under various pressures, explicitly or implicitly deprecating alternatives
- marketing of particular products and services, claimed as the ultimate experience, explicitly or implicitly deprecating alternatives
- [psychic numbing](#) describing the tendency of people (potentially as voters) to feel less urgent compassion and contribute less, when the suffering of others is shown to be more systemic and more pervasive, especially when described as affecting larger numbers of people.
- processes by which enthusiasm is "quenched", perhaps framed as a "cold shower" through which the potential of a creative initiative is "killed". There is an intriguing ambiguity to the use of the term "quenched" in that it is employed both for decay of the

much-valued plasma state (which nuclear fusion reactors endeavour to sustain) and in respect of the tempering of steel (through which the strength of the material is enhanced).

Understanding of related processes featured notably in the study by [Edward S. Herman](#) and [Noam Chomsky](#) (*Manufacturing Consent: the political economy of the mass media*, 1988).

In comparison with the conditioned responses engendered in laboratory animals (rewarded in response to choice-making), it is strange to note the behavioural and cognitive similarities in human engagement and expectations in relation to the stimulus offered by religious icons and variously picking at computer screens in response to options offered (gambling machines, video games, iPhones, iPads, etc). Much research on animal behaviour has contributed to enabling and reinforcing such conditioning.

Quest for life -- and feeling alive

Understanding of this quest might be usefully framed by the question: *how does one know when one is alive?* When does one "feel alive" -- "really alive"?

Cultivating the illusion of feeling alive: The difficulty may well lie in the need for a contrast with "feeling dead" -- by comparison, or in anticipation thereof. Without the contrast, is it then possible to "feel alive"? Are there degrees of "feeling alive" whose nature is necessarily difficult to communicate? Are there surrogate experiences through which one can assume (or believe) that one is "feeling alive", whether or not these are later discovered to be an illusion? Is it, for example, a goal of marketing of products, services or beliefs to provide the illusion of "feeling alive"? How could these cultivated impressions be distinguished from the reality of "feeling alive"? When might this matter?

Curiously "feeling alive" is readily associated with excitement (as noted above). This may take the form of happenings of various kinds -- of an adrenalin rush. It may be ensured through use of drugs -- whether or not this is merely the indulgence in an illusion. It may be associated with the process of discovery -- of many kinds. It may be associated with anticipation and a sense of possibility -- even extending to the risk of death.

World-making: These possibilities suggest that the feeling may be engendered and sustained through world-making -- through making one's own world, as discussed separately (*Identity, Possessive World-making and their Transformation Dynamics*, 2012). This is readily recognized in use of the expression that a person lives "in their own world", within which a relatively high degree of satisfaction is achieved. The question is then how the feeling of "being alive" is sustained within that context -- despite potential deprecation by others.

Strangely the possibility is anticipated through aspiration to moving to another planet, solar system or galaxy -- whether or not it requires terraforming (cf. Clara Moskowitz, *Stephen Hawking Says Humanity Won't Survive Without Leaving Earth*, *SPACE.com*, 10 August 2010; John M. Smart, *The Transcension Hypothesis: sufficiently advanced civilizations invariably leave our universe, and implications for METI and SETI*. *Acta Astronautica*, 78, September-October 2012). This "migration" to another world may already be understood to be in process through a shift in centre of gravity -- in the imagination, as cultivated in blockbuster fantasy movies. The shift has been anticipated in a popular musical: *Stop the World -- I Want to Get Off* (1961)

The somewhat desperate quest for other planets capable of "supporting life" leaves unanswered the question of the alternate forms which life may take -- even beyond the human capacity to recognize them. This would imply an inability to recognize other forms of death of significance to such contexts -- and by which humanity as a whole might well be framed. The constrained ability of humans with respect to communication with other species, worldviews, and generations, is indicative in this respect. Through the patterns of nacre, on pearls or otherwise, are molluscs endeavouring to communicate a message which the cryptographers of NSA are neither capable of decoding nor motivated to do so?

Beliefs sustaining a sense of being alive: The possibility can also be assumed to be operative in the adoption of an unusual belief system -- even one interpreted by others as pathological, as in the case of a cult. Any such criticism may however be challenged, given the possible experiential correspondence to "falling in love" -- through which a sense of "feeling alive" is so intimately shared. Ironically, however, the most unusual belief systems are those cultivated in the fantasies of astrophysics regarding the organization of the universe at its most fundamental level. The active quest for immortality -- and eternal happiness -- could be considered unexceptional by contrast.

Freedom: The sense of feeling alive can of course be readily conflated with that of freedom (in contrast to constraint) and with happiness as the core pursuit enshrined in the US Declaration of Independence. It is appropriate to note the current range of studies of [happiness](#) and what it means to be happy. Could these be understood as a quest for understanding of what it means to "feel alive" -- and how this quest may be inhibited or denatured by the emerging organization of society? Are there paradoxes to be explored in this connection (*Happiness and Unhappiness through Naysign and Nescience: comprehending the essence of sustainability?* 2008).

Quest for death -- and the significance of closure

It is readily assumed that any intentional quest for death is ridiculous. The issues noted above with respect to the ambiguities regarding attitudes to life and death make it apparent that matters are not so simple. Dramatic tales have cultivated the question: *how does one know when one is dead* -- especially following a [near-death experience](#).

Death wish: The systematic engagement in behaviours known to increase vulnerability to disease and premature death makes it apparent that there is indeed an unconscious [death wish](#) in the lives of many, as originally proposed by [Sigmund Freud](#) (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 1920). This is most obvious in the case of substance abuse (*Cognitive Implications of Lifestyle Diseases of Rich and Poor*, 2010). Freud's "pleasure principle" challenges the assumptions relating to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" and assumptions regarding the priority accorded to the quest for feeling "alive".

Quest for closure: Any form of death may be understood as a quest for final closure with respect to the complex processes of being alive. Whereas feeling alive offers the implication and potential of some form of [Theory of Everything](#), whether or not it can be comprehended, death as closure appears to be more readily comprehensible ([Hilary Lawson](#), *Closure: a story of everything*, 2001; Nancy Berns, *Closure: the rush to end grief and what it costs us*, 2011). [Russell Standish](#). *Theory of Nothing*, 2006). There is a curious sense in which the effort to achieve a sense of "being alive" may (mistakenly) involve a form of (en)closure readily to be recognized as a form of death.

Explanation as closure: Curiously a particular form of closure is evident in the quest for explanation -- terminating the tension and anxiety variously associated with an unresolved question. An explanation can then be understood as a form of death -- to be contrasted with the sense of life felt to be associated with the dynamic around a question. This is partly evident in engagement with a puzzle or a riddle prior to any solution. The legends of knightly quests can be explored in this light (*Implication of the 12 Knights in any Strategic Round Table: each circulating globally in quest of sustainability and immortality*, 2014).

The argument can be developed in the light of aversion to uncertainty and ambiguity -- leading to the spontaneous generation of plausible explanations, as discussed by [Maria Konnikova](#) (*Why We Need Answers*, *The New Yorker*, 30 April 2013). As famously noted by [H. L. Mencken](#): *For every complex problem there is an answer that is clear, simple, and wrong.*

Konnikova notes the formalization achieved by [Arie Kruglanski](#) and Donna Webster with respect to measurement of [need for closure](#) on a forty-two item scale [Need for Closure Scale](#) (*Individual differences in need for cognitive closure*, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 67, 1994). Somewhat ironically, in the light of the above argument, the work has since been developed with respect to a current major threat of death (*Need for Closure and the Social Response to Terrorism*, *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 32, 2010, 4). Death might then be considered the ultimate form of explanatory closure.

Possession as closure: There is a curious relationship between explanation and possession in that an explanation may be readily considered a possession -- even to the point of being subject to intellectual property and confidentiality provisions. Achieving possession, as with the occupation of territory through the elimination or subjection of other occupants or claimants, could then be understood as ensuring a form of death for the latter (*Identity, Possessive World-making and their Transformation Dynamics*, 2012).

The "development" of a pre-existing wilderness can be explored in these terms. Of potentially greater relevance is the sense in which those thereby seeking and achieving "life" -- in what has been effectively transformed into a killing field (or an environment of death) -- have ensured for themselves a special relationship with death.

Preoccupation with an "end": The abstraction of "closure" can be rendered more comprehensible through various ways of focusing on an "end":

- "end it all": as in seeking ways of terminating problematic, painful experience by taking some drastic measure
- "end times": as in the anticipation for prophesied [end times](#) scenarios, as described in the [eschatologies](#) of the dominant world religions, both [Abrahamic](#) and non-Abrahamic.
- "end up in": as framed by various religions with respect to the nature of an [afterlife](#), dependent on some evaluation of actions taken during life, as typically distinguished between:
 - [hell](#): understood as a place of eternal torment (*Pope Francis warns mafiosi to repent or "end up in hell"*, *The Guardian*, 22 March 2014)
 - [heaven](#): understood as accessible by earthly beings according to various standards of divinity, goodness, piety, faith, or other virtues or right beliefs or simply the Will of God -- as an eternal reward.
- "end of the line": whether understood as referring to the imminent cessation of life, to the end of a career, or to termination of an initiative (as a focus or vehicle of identity). It may be described in terms of reaching a "dead end".
- sense of destiny: as in the deeply personal sense (typically inexplicable) of the culmination of the endeavours and ambitions of a life. This may well be indistinguishable from a sense of [fate](#).
- manifest destiny: as recognized by certain cultures, possibly through interpretation of sacred scriptures as divine revelation, and reinforced by political agendas. Notable examples include a belief in the US in [Manifest Destiny](#). Such belief may be closely related to the sense of being a [chosen people](#) -- especially chosen to act as their deity's agent on earth.

Self-termination and nothingness: Of particular interest are the reflections of philosophers and others, notably when framing the termination of their own lives -- possibly through suicide ([Arthur Koestler](#), *Dialogue with Death*, 1942). A collection of commentaries on the final thoughts of 200 philosophers, and their understanding of death, has been compiled by [Martin Crowley](#) (*Dying Words: the last moments of writers and philosophers*, 2000).

The framing offered by [Jean-Paul Sartre](#) (*Being and Nothingness*, 1943) regarding the conflict between oppressive, spiritually destructive [conformity](#) (*mauvaise foi*, literally, "bad faith") and an "authentic" way of "being" can be fruitfully associated with that between the sense of "feeling dead" and that of "feeling alive". This is of course reminiscent of Shakespeare's dramatic question: *To be or not to be?*

The engagement with death may be framed otherwise in song or poetic form ([Harold Bloom](#), *Till I End My Song: a gathering of last poems*, 2010; [Richard Strauss](#), *Four Last Songs*, 1948; [Yoel Hoffmann](#), *Japanese Death Poems: written by Zen monks and haiku poets on the verge of death*, 1998).

Objective / Goal: There is a curious sense in which an objective as a focus of striving (perhaps framed as a goal) constitutes a form of "end" -- possibly even experienced as a form of death to which the preceding activity leads (given its associated sense of being alive). Use of "target" reinforces this sense. There may however be confusion between the end anticipated (when it may be hoped that life can be lived to the full) and any sense of death (when the striving towards it is over).

Framed in this way, the finality of an objective has a static quality in contrast to the dynamic in quest thereof ([Eugen Herrigel](#), *Zen in the*

Art of Archery, 1948). This may well be considered a fundamental dilemma with respect to sustainability and how it is to be "achieved" (*Dynamic Transformation of Static Reporting of Global Processes: suggestions for process-oriented titles of global issue reports*, 2013; *Paradoxes of Engaging with the Ultimate in any Guise: living life penultimately*, 2012).

These issues and framings may well be reflected in various sports (downhill skiing, goal scoring, etc), as well as in sexual intercourse and its culmination in a "little death" (*la petite mort*).

More general is the aspiration to "going there", with little consideration of the implications of "getting there", of "leaving here" -- or of the strange (virtual) "space" in which "there" is presumed to be located (possibly in some timeless manner). There is the further question of what one does (if anything) when one "gets there", especially when it is framed as a "place to be" -- like heaven. The issue has been highlighted with respect to Iraq through the 2003 *Mission Accomplished* declaration -- winning the war but with the subsequent loss of the peace, evident in the subsequent failure of nation-building in Afghanistan.

As with the above-mentioned tension, associated with a question and its elimination through an answer, the issue can be considered in terms of the *wave function collapse* in quantum mechanics. This has been exploited metaphorically with respect to psychological realities -- to "break free from the groove and unleash real change", as argued by Mel Schwartz (*Collapsing the Wave: creating new realities*, *Psychology Today*, 29 September 2011) or with respect to adaptive systems, as argued by Max J. Pucher (*Causality and Complex Adaptive Systems*, *Quantum Resonance*, 24 March 2009).

The definitive nature of a goal is also called into question by the subtle considerations associated with Zen reflection on the nature of *The Gateless Gate* as explicated through a set of 48 koans, necessarily paradoxical (*Configuring a Set of Zen Koan as a Wisdom Container: formatting the Gateless Gate for Twitter*, 2012). There is some irony to the fact that representations of that "gate", in the form of *torii* in Japan, closely resemble the design of football goal posts, as separately noted (*Civilization as a Global Configuration of Silences*, 2013).

If the goal is "the point of it all" -- most generally of "being alive" -- this suggests a need for reflection on the nature of "point-making" and its relation to "world-making" (*Going Nowhere through Not-knowing Where to Go: sustaining the process of autopoiesis through point-making*, 2013). The challenge in relation to "feeling alive" is evident in the sense of "pointlessness" engendered by depression (*Way Round Cognitive Ground Zero and Pointlessness? Embodying the geometry of fundamental cognitive dynamics*, 2012).

Civilizational collapse: This is now variously predicted as the outcome of global mismanagement of resources in the light of evidence of the collapse of past civilizations (Joseph Tainter, *The Collapse of Complex Societies*, 1988; Jared Diamond, *Collapse: how societies choose to fail or survive*, 2005). A summary of a variety of studies is provided by Karl W. Butzer (*Collapse, Environment, and Society*, *PNAS: Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 2012). In an earlier study, Butzer had noted that:

The phenomenal interregional disparities in population growth, economic productivity, and energy consumption suggest a socioeconomic network with severe cybernetic difficulties, one that is increasingly prone to catastrophic simplification (*Archaeology as Human Ecology: method and theory for a contextual approach*, 1982, p. 320)

As noted above, there is even a question of whether the current global civilization should already be considered dead -- whether or not this is widely recognized or meaningful. The process may be variously clarified:

- *Mind Map of Global Civilizational Collapse: why nothing is happening in response to global challenges* (2011)
- *Convergence of 30 Disabling Global Trends: mapping the social climate change engendering a perfect storm* (2012)

Excessive complexity engendering collapse

Complexification of global discourse: Especially intriguing are the arguments that collapse results from excessive (or unmanageable) complexification. Related points have been made by Thomas Homer-Dixon (*The Upside of Down: catastrophe, creativity, and the renewal of civilization*, 2006) -- further to his arguments regarding the capacity to encompass the challenge (*The Ingenuity Gap*, 2000).

An aspect of this complexification plays out in disagreement regarding what are variously upheld as "facts". This is admirably illustrated by the comments of Nafeez Ahmed (*Did Nasa fund 'civilisation collapse' study, or not?*, *The Guardian*, 21 March 2014) on the arguments of Keith Kloor (*The Well-Intentioned, Misguided Eco-Doomers*, *Discover*, 20 December 2013) regarding Ahmed's earlier comment (*Nasa-funded study: industrial civilisation headed for 'irreversible collapse'?* *The Guardian*, 14 March 2014) on the study in question (Safa Motesharrei, et al, *A Minimal Model for Human and Nature Interaction*, 2012). He notes the warning by the authors that:

While some members of society might raise the alarm that the system is moving towards an impending collapse and therefore advocate structural changes to society in order to avoid it, Elites and their supporters, who opposed making these changes, could point to the long sustainable trajectory 'so far' in support of doing nothing.

Together with this warning, the numerous comments in *The Guardian* regarding the study and the Ahmed-Kloor exchange constitute a rich illustration of the challenge of complexity as a prelude to possible collapse. A fruitful analysis of the model in question, **rather than the implications of the debate**, is provided by John Carlos Baez (*Civilizational Collapse*, *Azimuth*, 25 March 2014)

Meta-analysis? What is most intriguing is the variety of views expressed on such matters, each claiming to be especially "right" or insightful -- in contrast with other views expressed. And yet, whether in the "NASA-study" or the arguments of Kloor and Ahmed (referencing Tainter), no effort is made to consider that the systemic array of comments merits attention in its own right. Tainter has commented extensively on the effects of increasing complexity, of which this variety is evidence.

There is seemingly neither the capacity nor the desire to encompass such an exchange as a cognitive system in its own right. More generally it could be said that no modelling exercise is adequately self-reflexive such as to internalize and embody the variety of comments it is likely to engender -- according to principles of second or third-order cybernetics.

The technical possibilities developed for [Argument Mapping](#)-- such *Decision Explorer* as *Debategraph* -- are rarely, if ever, applied to such exchanges. The evident consequence is different constituencies beating different drums, each in the naive expectation that somehow all will tune in and "like" their particular thumping in an epiphany of consensus. Cultivation of this illusion would appear to be a key to guaranteed collapse.

Physics of collapse? Consistent with this dynamic is a challenge to Tainter's argument as usefully presented by Ugo Bardi (*Tainter's Law: where is the physics? Resilience*, March 2011) who notes:

But is there a single cause of collapse? Or are there several? Tainter looks for a single, common root of the problem and finds it in what he calls "the decreasing returns of complexity"... The idea of decreasing returns to complexity looks consistent and reasonable. But, why do societies behave in this way? Tainter does not provide a real explanation; on this point, he seems to follow the tradition of historians to describe rather than interpret. But, if you happen to have a more physics-oriented point of view, then describing what happens is not enough. You want to know what are the inner mechanisms that make civilisations evolve towards higher complexity. What is the physics of collapse?

Bardi has not related his argument to that of Thomas Homer-Dixon with which it appears consistent. This focuses on the increasing requirements of energy within the Roman Empire -- leading to its collapse.

Information overload: Missing in both arguments would appear be a generalization of complexity to include that associated with information as a resource, especially in terms of the capacity to handle information overload (*Entangling with information overload and explanatory closure*, 2013). This then results in widespread challenges to comprehension by a global population purportedly mandating strategic decision-making. Civilization is increasingly challenged by [throughput capacity](#), namely the rate of successful message delivery over any communication channel -- clearly critical with respect to knowledge. It could be argued that **throughput capacity is severely reduced by a form of "calcification of the arteries" of information flow**, with critical cognitive implications in a knowledge-based society. This calcification is notably exacerbated by intellectual copyright and confidentiality provisions. This calcification could be understood as a collective lifestyle disease through which society is progressively bringing itself to a condition of collapse -- as is so well illustrated in physiological terms..

The implication of the absence of any key factors itself offers clues to further exploration (*Lipoproblems: developing a strategy omitting a key problem*, 2009). As discussed previously (*Evolutionary influence of the absent*, 2011), with respect to the argument of [Terrence W. Deacon](#) (*Incomplete Nature: how mind emerged from matter*, 2011), a key factor with respect to the emergence of knowledge may be intimately associated with what is missing -- a point succinctly made in the contrast between the print and online summaries of his argument (*The importance of what is missing*, *New Scientist*, 26 November 2011; *Consciousness is a matter of constraint*, *New Scientist*, 30 November 2011). For Deacon:

... **have we been looking in the wrong places for clues?** ... brain researchers and philosophers of mind have focused on brain processes, neural computations and their correspondences with the material world. But what if we should be focusing on what is not there instead? ... I believe that in order to overcome this stalemate **we need to pay more attention to what is intrinsically not present in everything** -- from life's functions and meanings to mind's experiences and values. [*emphasis added*]

Organizational implications: The point can be expressed otherwise by citing a recent editorial in *The Economist* (*Fighting the Flab*, 22-28 March 2014) arguing that "corporate headquarters have put on weight, and need to slim down again":

Various events, from the September 11th 2001 terror attacks to the financial crisis, may have made bosses view the world as an increasingly complicated and uncertain place. It would not be surprising if many of them responded in the same way as Jeffrey Immelt, the boss of GE: in his latest annual letter to shareholders, he confessed that "We attempted to manage the volatility through layers and reviewers. Like many companies we were guilty of countering complexity with complexity... more inspectors, multiple reviewers." The result was a "higher cost structure, an artificial sense of risk management, and we were insulating our people from the heat of the market." Mr Immelt has now decided to reverse course. GE has launched a new simplification strategy... Other bosses would be wise to do the same...

The above reframing might well be challenged in the light of a popular quotation on reorganization, often (but spuriously) attributed to a [Gaius Petronius](#) in Nero's Rome (actually by [Charlton Ogburn](#), 1957). One version reads:

We trained hard ... but it seemed that every time we were beginning to form up into teams we would be reorganized. I was to learn later in life that we tend to meet any new situation by reorganizing; and a wonderful method it can be for creating the illusion of progress while producing confusion, inefficiency, and demoralization.

The argument could be refined in environmental terms by reference to species perceived to have reached a so-called "evolutionary dead end" -- notably in the light of developmental biology. The tracheal system of respiration in insects is recognized as imposing a limit on their size. No consideration is given to the possibility that humans may face such a dead end through the manner of their "inspiration" and

the inadequacy of their throughput capacity (as noted above).

Death as a personal response to over-complexification? Whilst there is great value to exploring vulnerability to collapse from the collective perspective of civilizations, the argument also merits adaptation to the challenge for an individual -- especially when combined with those of biological aging. An indicative phrase, typically of older generations, is that "it is all becoming too much to handle". This is especially obvious with respect to the market-driven complexification of features and transactional processes enabled by information technology -- rendering them incomprehensible to many.

Within an organization, this may well be seen as a reason for retirement in favour of a younger person. Problematically however, the capacity to "handle" complexity may then be achieved by over-simplification in order to avoid any sense of being overwhelmed -- irrespective of the necessary engagement with complexity which may be required (as possibly recognized by elders).

Sensing personal "world lines" and identifying with their convergence

Given the understanding of "world line" in physics, and some interpretation of its personal significance, there is a case for recognition of the manner in which people may sense what is conveniently defined metaphorically as a "line" and identify with it in ways which are essentially inexplicable and incommunicable.

Specifically it may be asked, as implied by that metaphor, what is the geometry or topology that any such sense implies experientially:

- **Physics:** In physics, the [world line](#) of an object is the unique path of that object as it travels through 4-dimensional spacetime. The concept of "world line" is distinguished from the concept of "orbit" or "trajectory" (such as an orbit in space or a trajectory of a truck on a road map) by the time dimension, and typically encompasses a large area of spacetime wherein perceptually straight paths are recalculated to show their (relatively) more absolute position states -- to reveal the nature of special relativity or gravitational interactions. However, world lines are a general way of representing the course of events. The use of it is not bound to any specific theory. Thus in general usage, a world line is the sequential path of personal human events (with time and place as dimensions) that marks the history of a person -- perhaps starting at the time and place of one's birth until one's death.
- **Literature:** The physical insight has been variously exploited as an inspiration in literature, especially science fiction, as partially discussed separately (*World lines and the navigation of imagination space*, 2010). According to Norman Robertson, regarding a description by [J. C. Fields](#):

He postulated that, commencing with his birth, every human being had some kind of spiritual aura with a long filament or thread attached, that travelled behind him throughout his life. He then proceeded in imagination to describe the complicated entanglement every individual became involved in his relationship to other individuals, comparing the simple entanglements of youth to those complicated knots that develop in later life ([Gilbert de Beauregard Robinson](#), *The Mathematics Department in the University of Toronto*, 1979, p. 19)

As described in an [extended commentary](#) by *Wikipedia*, most descriptions by science fiction writers are held to be fanciful.

- **"Following a line":** Variants of this metaphorical expression are used with regard to:
 - a career path or track
 - a line of research
 - a line of argument, notably in an effort to persuade and convince (as in "spinning a line" in marketing and flirtation)
 - a spiritual or philosophical path -- possibly framed in terms of "having a one-track mind"
 - "toeing the line" as with respect to instructions by authority or in obedience to a political or ideological directive

These all imply an internalized sense of "knowing where one is going" -- of having a sense of the lines and contours of one's world with all its complexities and convolutions. This could be described metaphorically in topographical or topological terms. Hence the merit of sensing the identification with the line of travel -- even if it involves "knots", passes through "tunnels", or down "holes". In the latter case, the nature of the associated "nothingness" becomes more mysterious, as remarkably discussed by Roberto Casati and Achille C. Varzi (*Holes and Other Superficialities*, 1994) -- with respect to the borderlines of metaphysics, everyday geometry, and the theory of perception (as they summarize in the [entry on holes](#) in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*).

- **Configuration and convergence:** Of particular interest is a degree of recognition of convergence of such experiential lines. Allusions to this take the form of recognition of "poetic justice" or a sense that a person's "time has come" -- perhaps rendered uniquely comprehensible through the pattern of a drama. The latter may relate to a sense of destiny or fate, or to life's ending. The convergence of lines may be recognized through a configuration of events. Clearly this has very particular significance with respect to any form of martyrdom or heroic action -- as framed by doctrines of jihad, kamikaze operations, and perhaps including those of Greenpeace. For the individual it of course includes [school shootings](#) through which there is a sense that a "mark can be made" (*Grievous but Necessary: Global Governance in the 21st Century?* 2011).

Especially indicative may be "depression", as argued by Jonathan Rottenberg (*The Depths: the evolutionary origins of the depression epidemic*, 2014). He explains that despite advances in pharmaceutical science, progress has been hampered by the fundamental misunderstanding of depression as a psychological or chemical defect. Rottenberg argues that depression is a particularly severe outgrowth of the natural capacity for emotion; it is a low mood gone haywire.

For Rottenberg enthusiasts for the "pursuit of happiness" may perversely push some towards depression. Happiness may then be understood as the result of achieving a goal, rather than the goal itself -- recalling the adage: beware of what you desire, you may achieve it. Depression may be triggered by setting unobtainable goals. Is "sustainability" to be recognized as an unobtainable framing?

These variously constitute indications of how meaning of a "higher order" is given to life and death. It is these experiential qualities that have yet to be embodied in current preoccupations with [immortality](#), as articulated by [transhumanism](#) and other belief systems. Elements of this understanding are evident in the various framings of individual "rebirth" and the possibility of collective "renaissance" (*Varieties of Rebirth: distinguishing ways of being born again*, 2004; *Consciously Self-reflexive Global Initiatives: Renaissance zones, complex adaptive systems, and third order organizations*, 2007). Topological implications have been extensively explored by [Steven M. Rosen](#) (*Dreams, Death, Rebirth: a multimedia topological odyssey into alchemy's hidden dimensions*, 2013) in the light of his earlier work.

Curiously there is some sense in which the intangible experiential lines of a person are recognized as leaving a trace in the form of wrinkles later in life "written in the lines of the face". This recognition is more specifically echoed in beliefs relating to palmistry.

Being alive through centering?

Geometrical metaphors: The exploration can be taken further through geometrical and topological metaphors -- extending their use with respect to "following a line" and "end of the line" (as noted above). If a degree of identification is intuitively associated with some sense of geometry, one approach is to assume that "feeling alive" is somehow associated with "being centered". This metaphor is frequently used in disciplines of personal development. It would then contrast with forms of dispersion readily understandable as associated with death, whether or not it is associated with "feeling dead".

Patterns of convergence: The suggestion would then be that personal "world lines" (as discussed above) are somehow configured into a pattern of convergence then to be associated with the intuition that "feeling alive" implies "getting one's act together". The simplest geometrical representation of this would be a circle -- widely considered as indicative of a form of integration. However, given the kind of closure implied by "world-making" (as mentioned above), a more integrative geometrical representation would be a sphere -- offering a degree of resonance with the form of the globe. Both of these offer a particular sense of a centre with which identity might be associated.

How might the sense of "feeling alive" be associated with that centre, whether as a somewhat explicit point of convergence of world lines or as a virtual centre of a more implicit nature -- perhaps an "empty centre", consistent with the quest of some spiritual disciplines? Does "feeling alive" imply some kind of dynamic between the centre and the circumference through the pattern of world lines?

Insights of mathematicians? It might be expected that this relatively simple geometry would have been speculatively explored by mathematicians, especially when faced with imminent death or the declining competence associated with progressive dementia. This does not appear to be the case -- as argued separately (*Mathematical Cosmology and Death*, 2013). Mathematicians and cosmologists are seemingly cognitively disassociated from their own demise -- despite possessing considerable skills with which to reflect on ends, centres, lines, and the beginnings and endings of the universe -- to say nothing of the worlds they have made for themselves within it. It might be said that they collapse unknowingly into the nothingness from which they believe the universe to have emerged. This belief is provocatively challenged by the arguments from a cognitive psychological perspective of [George Lakoff](#) and [Rafael Nuñez](#) (*Where Mathematics Comes From: how the embodied mind brings mathematics into being*, 2001).

Forms beyond the sphere: Taking the argument further, it could then be asked whether there are more complex forms than the circle and sphere with which identity could be associated -- as topological "templates" through which "feeling alive" can be sustained. The question also frames the issue of whether such forms are enabling templates or constraining containers -- framing the challenge of "breaking out" of more restrictive containers into those of higher dimensionality. Are there then higher orders of "feeling alive"? The corollary is of course whether "feeling dead" is to be associated with geometry of lower dimensionality than has been experienced -- even to the point of final demise. Mathematician Ronald Atkin frames the question as: *Multidimensional Man: can man live in three dimensions?* (1981) -- separately discussed as *Social organization determined by incommunicability of insights*.

Meta-patterning: This framing suggests that "feeling alive" is associated with patterns of ever greater complexity -- with meta-patterns, as argued by [Gregory Bateson](#) in affirming:

The pattern which connects is a meta-pattern. It is a pattern of patterns. It is that meta-pattern which defines the vast generalization that, indeed, it is patterns which connect. (*Mind and Nature: a necessary unity*, 1979)

And it is from this perspective that he warns: *Break the pattern which connects the items of learning and you necessarily destroy all quality* (1979, pp. 8-11). This echoes [Christopher Alexander's](#) sense that: *in our time the languages have broken down* (*The Timeless Way of Building*, 1979).

Comprehension: From the perspective of mathematics and (astro)physics, there is no lack of more complex forms which might serve as fruitful templates or indicators of "being alive". The difficulty is there relative incomprehensibility to most and the lack of attention to the manner of engaging with them cognitively -- rather than formalistically (*Dynamics of Symmetry Group Theorizing: comprehension of psycho-social implication*, 2008).

The issues of relevance might be clustered as follows, with indication of separate discussions:

- **centre/periphery relations**, notably with respect to integration and dispersion and the role of emptiness/nothingness
 - *Enabling Wisdom Dynamically within Intertwined Tori: requisite resonance in global knowledge architecture*, 2012
 - *Psycho-social Significance of the Mandelbrot Set: a sustainable boundary between chaos and order*, 2005

- **self-reflexivity**, notably to be understood in terms of mirroring, with the centre mirrored by the periphery
 - *Consciously Self-reflexive Global Initiatives: Renaissance zones, complex adaptive systems, and third order organizations*, 2007
 - *En-joying the World through En-joying Oneself* (2011)
- **subjectivity vs. objectivity**, notably in relation to externality
 - *¿ Defining the objective ∞ Refining the subjective ?!: Explaining reality ∞ Embodying realization*, 2011
 - *Existential Embodiment of Externalities: radical cognitive engagement with environmental categories and disciplines*, 2009
 - *Psychosocial Implication of Without Within: enjoying going solar for oneself*, 2013
- potential **metaphoric/mnemonic function of externality**, notably on the largest scale
 - *Being the Universe : a Metaphoric Frontier*, 1999
 - *Towards an Astrophysics of the Knowledge Universe: from astronautics to noonautics?* 2006
 - *Eliciting a Universe of Meaning -- within a global information society of fragmenting knowledge and relationships*, 2013
- **dynamic implications** in contrast to static preferences and assumptions
 - *Dynamic Transformation of Static Reporting of Global Processes: suggestions for process-oriented titles of global issue reports*, 2013
 - *In Quest of a Dynamic Pattern of Transformations: sensing the strange attractor of an emerging Rosetta Stone*, 2012
- **degrees of integration** hypothesized, whether or not they can be comprehended
 - *Potential Psychosocial Significance of Monstrous Moonshine: an exceptional form of symmetry as a Rosetta stone for cognitive frameworks*, 2007

The complexity and its incomprehensibility call for radical innovation in the use of mnemonic aids. The case for fruitful possibilities is made separately:

- *Being a Poem in the Making: engendering a multiverse through musing*, 2012
- *A Singable Earth Charter, EU Constitution or Global Ethic?* 2006
- *Living with Incomprehension and Uncertainty: re-cognizing the varieties of non-comprehension and misunderstanding*, 2012

Feeling alive now and knowing it

This argument is developed further in an annex: *Now as the Ultimate Cognitive Strange Attractor: a continuing invitation "down the rabbit hole"?* in the following sections:

- Challenging conventional understandings of centre
- Experiencing "now" through questions rather than answers
- Cognitive catastrophes and their associated questions?
- Configuration of question-pairs
- Patterns of questions indicative of the subunderstanding of now
- Polyhedral configuration of questions
- Musical implications of orbifolds for comprehension of questioning dynamics
- Questions undermining integrative insight and initiatives
- Implications of question configuration in practice
- Mapping of WH-questions with question-pairs onto a memorable polyhedron (a football)
- Mapping of WH-questions with question-pairs onto the Szilassi polyhedron
- Potential insights into the Szilassi configuration of WH-questions from 4D
- Reframing nothing as a vital focus for sustainability

This reframes "centre" as a curious form of "hole" which, like the black holes of astrophysics, functions as a strange form of cognitive attractor. As such, in the moment, the experience of "now" is a continuing invitation to "go down the rabbit hole", as framed in 1865 for children by Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, 1865) under the pseudonym Lewis Carroll. Dodgson was a mathematician and logician (*The Game of Logic*, 1887). Entering a "rabbit hole" has been understood as framing a period of chaos or confusion -- appropriate to the current condition of global civilization and the challenge of individual response to it.

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