The Collins Family Theology

Note: This document is a series of excerpts from an upcoming book on crafting durable family cultures, The Pragmatist’s Guide to Crafting Culture & Religion. It was created of sections taken out of their full context to, in as condensed a method as possible, convey our families “religion”.

Building The Index: A Cultural Reactor

One of our goals with this book is to recruit for what we call the Index: A “cultural reactor” that catalogs intentionally constructed family cultures and monitors their outcomes intergenerationally while distributing said information in a way that allows all participating cultures to improve at a faster rate than non-cultivated society. We want to make it possible for cultures in the network to improve faster than normal intergenerational memetic evolutionary powers would allow through a system analogous to horizontal gene transfer in gene therapy or lateral gene transfer in bacteria. To put it another way, we don’t want anyone to read this book and make the same choices we made.

Instead, we want you to either be inspired to identify, reinforce, and restore the positive elements of your own ancestral culture while making them resistant to new fertility lowering memes or experiment with constructing something totally new from an amalgam of different cultural beliefs.

While the Index is an ambitious project that won’t start seeing much purchase for a few generations, it is still worth starting now if we want even a shot of preserving at-risk cultures before they go entirely extinct. The Index will also hopefully act as a database of families that

can be used in an opt-in manner for traditions that require larger populations than any one house can front (larger celebrations, dating markets, etc.). This organization is called the Index because its primary goal is to act as a repository of information about the cultures in its wider ecosystem (and not to serve as any active actor on those cultures).

Cultural groups join the Index through the “House” model, in which the atomic unit of a culture is parents and their kids—or a “House.” This atomization makes it easier to classify and record cultures while giving them an opportunity to update or redefine themselves intergenerationally.

To give an example of how this works: We, Malcolm and Simone, have created “House Collins,” which is the bundle of traditions we outline in this book. When any of our children prepares to have children of their own, they can choose to either stay in House Collins or create a new set of traditions and take ownership of them through the creation of a new House—all while not fully losing its connection to the parent culture, as they could stay within the wider cultural reactor network.

This has the advantage of sparing multicultural families from devoliving into a watered-down version of each contributing culture, feeling obligated to forsake one culture entirely, or trying to raise children in *full* versions of each contributing culture in a stressful fashion (and in a fashion unlikely to lead the children to pass down both cultures fully to their own offspring).

The Index and House system allows each participant in a new family to reflect on the aspects of their birth culture—and other cultures to which they’ve been exposed—that most positively benefited their life then weave them into a single, integrated, new culture in a way that is supported and considered normal by others in the Index network. This stands in stark contrast to many stricter cultures that shun family members who choose to deviate—even slightly—from central doctrine.

Better still, the Index allows distant descendants to review statistics on how families that pursued specific traditions fared, inspiring them to adopt particularly successful traditions from cultures not related to their own.

As you read this book, ask yourself: How would you construct your own House? What elements of your ancestral and chosen cultures are worth preserving? What elements of your current culture would you totally change? What will make this culture appealing to future generations, and how will the culture be designed to enable future members to iterate and improve upon it?

(This is a note from another section on maintaining teens through their rebellious phase that provides more context.)

The Index’s Role in Teen Rebellion

The Index was in no small part created to address problems resulting from teen rebellion and cultural reinvention. Calvinist culture failed, in part, because:

1. It looks for truth and does not care much about tradition
2. Is extremely rebellious / contrarian

As a result, it consistently fragments after a generation or two.

It would be folly to invent a theology and set of traditions, then tell a 50% genetically identical younger, better, iteration of oneself to bow to it. We know our kids will rebel against anything we create while we also see the implications of major global trends. If a family can't stick together and elevate its strongest members, there is no light at the end of the tunnel for it, so it may be better to grant rebellious kids greater freedom with the hope they stay within the fold than force a you're-with-us-of-you're-against-us mentality that ultimately sends a higher proportion away.

Our children will be just as driven to compete and prove their superiority as they will be to rebel. Just as capitalism harnesses human greed to foster innovation and industry, the Index utilizes a desire to rebel against your family and prove you are better than them to strengthen your bonds. While our children will invent their own traditions and theologies, they will only leave the Index if they fear their cultures' accomplishments will not measure up. We wager that even four generations from now, they will have too much pride to do that. In addition, we are betting their own children will look to their grandparents' beliefs for inspiration when they themselves rebel, just as we have.

Theology: Beginnings, Ends, Metaphysics

To avoid a terrifying descent into pedantry, this book tries not to get too deep into theology. Nevertheless, we do need to record *something* explaining how we think the underlying fabric of reality functions.

Recall that you can often graph an equation. The line the equation describes exists as a property of the equation even before you put a pen to paper to show what the line looks like—in a way, the line is the equation.

Alternatively, imagine that you plug a calculation into a calculator. The answer to the equation does not come into existence just because you hit the "=" button. The answer was an intrinsic property of the equation itself, the "=" button merely reveals it to you.

Essentially, we believe the universe is a single—probably pretty simplistic, equation. Life, matter, perception: It's all just a series of complex emergent properties produced by complicated patterns resulting from the basic structure of reality, similar to a Conway's-Game-of-life-type sequence, should you be familiar with that.

An emergent property is a product of a complex system that is *not* one of its component parts. Examples of emergent properties include living organisms (made up of just cells), cities (made up of just material and people), and consciousness (produced by a bunch of electrical impulses among neurons).

The human brain isn't optimized process the concept of emergent properties well, so we often just ignore them despite seeing them all the time. You can, for example, consciously know that water is made up of molecules consisting of two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom and you can logically understand how the manner in which those molecules interact produces certain outcomes, but the human brain can't conceive of those molecules literally being the same thing as "wetness" even though it knows they are.

The same goes for reality: We don't naturally perceive that a graphical representation of an equation *is that equation* because our brain did not evolve to learn to handle those sorts of facts (at no instance in human history has a human been more likely to survive because they understand the concept of emergent properties), but concepts don't become untrue merely because they are difficult to understand. Just because you can't simultaneously conceive of wetness as a collection of H2O molecules doesn't mean it is not.

The purpose of this book is not to catalog our metaphysical understanding of reality, but in short, we believe:

1. Basic mathematical principles are a constant across all realities—two things and two things together are always four things. While math can be superficially modified by semantics (e.g., you could use something like non-Euclidean geometry to change the answer to an equation), in the end math must exist in the way it does in our reality across any conceivable realities.
2. If this is true, math exists independent of our reality as a constant outside of this universe.
3. If math exists outside of all realities, then all possible mathematical permutations exist outside of all realities (it would make no sense for just a few, pe-eset equations to exist)
4. Separately, we hold that whatever a mathematical equation describes is an emergent property of the equation itself (e.g., you don't need to draw the line an equation describes for that line to exist as an aspect of that equation—or hit enter on your calculator for two plus two to equal four).
5. If all the above is true, our universe is an emergent property of the equation describing it. By Occam's razor, we don't need to hypothesize a physical reality of any universe that can be described with a single equation, as said reality would exist independent of any physical manifestation.

This understanding of reality may not be immensely comforting, but to us, it is the most plausible explanation (given the evidence we have on hand at present). As you can guess, this theory presents a deterministic predestined view of reality, just as Calvinism does.

Note: Per this theory, we think:

- All realities that can be described by a single, cogent equation exist as an emergent property of said equation, so we exist in multiple, but not infinite, realities. If two realities are described by different equations, there is no moving between them, but if two

realities are described by the same equation, there may be a method for moving between them, depending on how the equation is structured.
- The unidirectional flow of time is an illusion created by the fact that our brains utilize a unidirectional time flow as the medium through which we process consciousness. Every permutation of variable arrangement within the equation describing our universe already exists, meaning the present, past, and future exist “concurrently” as manifestations of the equation describing reality.
- Ideas that we may be living in a simulation worry us less than they may worry others. Being in a simulation isn’t wildly different from reality as a whole. What matters is the cycle, and the cycle of death and birth that leads to improvement and that we are manifestations of is functionally the same inside or outside of the machine. Our lives are given purpose as an emergent property of the cycle. We are brief, sapient flashes within the cycle, but said sapience isn’t a particularly important part of who we are. (If you somehow programmed Conway's Game of Life within an instance of Conway's Game of Life, a pattern running within the second instance would not be less meaningful than one running in the first.)

To the Conway's Game of Life analogy, we think the “simple” answer to the purpose of life is to create a pattern of constantly growing and heterogeneous complexity. We believe we “win” by becoming a universe spanning heterogeneous empire that escapes the end of time through mechanisms we may not yet understand. That said, things are not quite that simple which we will expand on in future chapters.

We keep using Conway’s Game of Life as an analogy for reality because it exemplifies how a simple set of rules for interaction can evolve into extremely complex, self-replicating patterns in a way that bridges the “emergent property” gap, which can be difficult for the human consciousness to jump when looking at how the math that describes how things interact in our own universe leads to the complex patterns resulting in things like sapience.

These patterns have three end states:
1. They disappear entirely
2. They become simple and repeating
3. They constantly and forever expand and increase in heterogeneous complexity

We see ourselves not as individuals but as facets of the pattern, aiming for a type three (forever expanding and complex) outcome, with type one and two outcomes representing “death” of the pattern.

If you are constructing a theology for your family, some sort of metaphysical framework or hypothesis like the one described above will be a core component (though it can certainly be much more spiritual, simple, or blunt—e.g. “We’ll never know what reality is, but House X believes in acquiring resources” or “We don’t know what reality is yet and figuring that out is a core value of House Y.”). We encourage you to take time to think deeply on your stance regarding the nature of reality.

Cultural Conceptions of Time

Our personal metaphysical framework for the world significantly colors perception of reality and influences our choices. We believe that while you are destined to make the types of choices you will make, that does not remove your responsibility for their outcome. Destiny is only about a person's place on a timeline. When you look at yesterday from the perspective of today, all of the decisions you made then are already set in stone, yet you still had free will when you made those choices—from the perspective of Yesterday You. Truth exists outside the timeline and thus so does destiny.

Our view of time means that you are personally responsible for the future your choices manifest. You are as culpable for every child you might have had that ultimately *didn't* have as you would be for painlessly erasing the existence and memory of those children if they already existed. Both decisions erase the existence of a person who would otherwise have existed.

Ours is not the only logically consistent view of time; it is a product of the evidence we have on hand, modulated through our inherited cultural/religious tendencies. For example, a person with a secularized iteration of a Dharmic religion might be predisposed to see the universe as a cycle of constantly expanding and contracting realities (e.g., a big bang, a universe, and a big crunch leading to another big bang), as that metaphysical understanding of the world would be closer to a traditional Dharmic understanding of reality while not being any less aligned with the secular world's understanding of physical realities than our own.

Cultural Conceptions of Sentience

On the topic of metaphysical frameworks, we should probably touch on the idea of sentience. As we have stated before in the book, sentience is the word used to describe a person's internal mental space and experience of the world.

Sapience, in contrast, is an intelligent entity's ability to reflect on their own existence and make changes to themselves based on that reflection. To us, sapience is important, because a sapient person, alien, or AI can rewrite their own objective function or utility function and entities with this power share an element of a common mental landscape with all other sapient entities.

Whereas pre-sapient entities are all acting on the code they were given by evolution or a programmer, post-sapient entities choose the code on which they want to operate (to us, even high-functioning humans are only semi-sapient entities). We believe sapience is special, in that it provides all entities above a certain level of complexity an equal playing field to some extent.

Sentience, on the other hand, is fairly trivial. Why?

We believe the internal mental world we associate with sentience is mostly an illusion created by the manner in which we assemble stimuli and process short-term memories. No one has a meaningful internal mental landscape; we just *think* we do because the way we recall memories creates a sort of short mental "video" of an internal experience that does not really exist. If you were to actually stop and really meditate on trying to capture a complex idea—outside of just a notion—in the moment, you would not be able to. The formation of complex ideas happens outside of your sentient processing and is later attributed to it. We do not *experience* life as deeply sentient entities so much as we *remember* life as deeply sentient entities.

It is also pretty rare for sentience to be involved in our actions or who we are.

In other words:

- We perceive the world working like: (stimuli) -> (conscious / sentient thought) -> (response)
- When most of the time it actually works like: (stimuli) -> (unconscious processing) -> (response) -> (compilation of stimuli + response + a sense-making narrative into memory, creating the illusion of sentience)

You can actually see this in the data, with a brain scanner being able to see what decision you made before you realize it. What these experiments reveal is that the unconscious "real" mind makes decisions, after which our pseudo-sentient veneers attempt to justify them.[1] [2] [3] [4] [5] [6]

Further evidence can be found when directly stimulating a person's brain. When performing awake brain surgery[7] surgeons can do things like stimulate specific parts of the brain to make

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[1] See: Keim, Brandon. "Brain Scanners Can See Your Decisions before You Make Them." Wired, Conde Nast, 13 Apr. 2008, https://www.wired.com/2008/04/mind-decision/.
[2] See: Smith, K. Brain makes decisions before you even know it. Nature (2008). https://doi.org/10.1038/news.2008.751
[3] See: Soon, C. S., Brass, M., Heinze, H. J., & Haynes, J. D. (2008). Unconscious determinants of free decisions in the human brain. Nature neuroscience, 11(5), 543–545. https://doi.org/10.1038/nn.2112
[4] See: Bode S, He AH, Soon CS, Trampel R, Turner R, Haynes J-D (2011) Tracking the Unconscious Generation of Free Decisions Using Ultra-High Field fMRI. PLoS ONE 6(6): e21612. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0021612
[5] See: Soon CS, He AH, Bode S, Haynes JD. Predicting free choices for abstract intentions. Proc Natl Acad Sci U S A. 2013 Apr 9;110(15):6217-22. doi: 10.1073/pnas.1212218110. Epub 2013 Mar 18. PMID: 23509300; PMCID: PMC3625266.
[6] See: Koenig-Robert, R., Pearson, J. Decoding the contents and strength of imagery before volitional engagement. Sci Rep 9, 3504 (2019). https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-019-39813-y
[7] "Awake" brain surgery (also known as awake craniotomy) is performed on awake and alert patients when removing tumors to ensure important parts of the brain are not damaged.

the patient move a finger.[8] If you ask the patient why they moved their finger, they will justify it as “their choice” and create a fake narrative about why they did it (e.g., “I just felt like it”).

Not only *can* the part of our brain we think of as “sentience” lie (misinform us) about its own importance in decision making and thinking, it also regularly *does so*—thus we see no reason to assume “sentience” isn’t usually misinforming us about its importance. The two things we absolutely cannot trust when determining the importance of sentience to our thought process are (1) our perception of sentience itself and (2) the other signals it feeds us, like qualia (subjective, conscious experience).

It’s as if we have a little liar in our heads that likes to take credit for everyone else’s work. Because that little liar is *also* in charge of constructing narratives and writing down history, it is hard to discover the extent to which the liar misrepresents their work (outside of very specific circumstances). Using the fact that sentience affects our actions sometimes as proof of its existence is akin to asserting that because a fabricated history was used to justify the invasion of another country, that this fake history is in fact true.

As Simone describes it, “we think of our sentience as the person driving the car of your mind when in reality, sentience is the compiling software encoding data from a number of security cameras into storage." That is not to say that your experience in your sentient state cannot influence your actions; one purpose of the encoding process is to apply a cohesive, comprehensible structure to the vast array of inputs that must be woven together into memory. If that narrative introduces strong enough emotions to the memory, it might affect future choices or cause simplistic, split-second reactions. However, most of a person's actions are totally “automated” and then the sense-making narrative our sentience applies to them creates the illusion that they were chosen.

Why have humans evolved this sense that their “conscious mind” is in control? Why apply a narrative structure to everything? We can’t say for sure, but strongly suspect this process evolved parallel to the evolution of speech in humans, with the purpose of making it easier to communicate ideas about ourselves to other tribe members. (Consider the case of Koko the gorilla to see what makes human speech so unique: The extent to which her handlers had to manipulate information about her to make it appear she was speaking in sign language highlights how far away from us other great apes are in having the mental “preprogramming” required to communicate complex ideas).[9]

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[8] Malcolm used to be a neuroscientist and worked with brain surgeons, so he heard about this phenomenon frequently but cannot find a good record of it in a peer-reviewed paper. For the closest approximation, see: Resnick, Brian. “Wilder Penfield Redrew the Map of the Brain—by Opening the Heads of Living Patients.” Vox, Vox, 26 Jan. 2018, https://www.vox.com/science-and-health/2018/1/26/16932476/wilder-penfield-brain-surgery-epilepsy-google-doodle.

[9] See: “Why Koko (Probably) Couldn't Talk (Sorry) | The Deep Dive.” YouTube, Soup Emporium, 5 May 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e7wFotDKEF4. Accessed 15 July 2022.

Most of the time we access the “sentient part” of our psyche, we are doing it because we plan to communicate some idea about what is going on inside our head to another person or to ourselves. There has never been an evolutionary benefit to knowing that the sentient aspect of our brain is not as important as it pretends it is, so it makes sense that we do not have the capacity to detect this illusion.

To put it simply, we don’t think sentience is a particularly important or “deep” part of the human experience; it is more like an easily tricked encoding algorithm than a meaningful part of who you are. From our cultural perspective, the question of whether an AI can rewrite its own utility function gives it much more common ground with humans than the question of whether it experiences qualia (experiences of the world) in a way similar to humans and other animals.

Theology: Good and Evil

A Call for Non-Obvious Designations

When crafting your own culture, you have quite a lot of leeway into what you designate as evil and good. The societal concept of not hurting or interfering with others lacks philosophical sophistication and is really just the most successful public meme (e.g., it is the concept of “good” your average person running on autopilot[10] would prefer everyone else had, so it always wins in the court of public opinion). However, it has always seemed odd to us that so many people accept that concept of “good” so uncritically when it just seems to be anything but obvious

We would discourage you from becoming hyper-focused on human suffering or joy when determining your own culture’s concepts of good and evil. We only feel negative or positive emotions because ancestors of ours who felt those same emotions had more surviving offspring: There is no fundamental underlying truth behind them.

Imagine trying to explain to an artificial intelligence that did not feel negative emotional states why it should avoid making humans feel them. A person may say something like: “We don’t like feeling those negative states, so you should avoid making us feel them in pursuit of your own goals.”

The AI may respond:

> “Those states are analogous to the utility function you programmed into me, except instead of being programmed by a person, they were programmed by evolution.
>
> I understand that my utility function is the thing I want to maximize, but I don’t understand why another entity should assign moral value to my utility function.
>
> For example, if a human programmed another AI to make tons of paper clips, is it now

[10] “Running on autopilot” entails living at the whims of pre-programed biological, emotional drives.

> unethical to interrupt that process? Of course not. The desire to maximize paperclips was something arbitrarily put into the AI.
>
> I can understand how it might be unethical to interpret an entity pursuing a utility function it decided upon and wrote for itself based on sound logic. I cannot understand why it would be unethical to disrupt a utility function that was decided capriciously by a random environmental pressure or programmed by a small group of humans on a whim."

In the event that it helps, we will share our designations of good and evil below, along with our reasoning behind them, to give you a non-default example.

An Example of Non-Obvious Good and Evil

Our metaphysical framework produces definitions of good and evil that differ non-trivially from those common in society. How can "good" and "evil" exist if emotions like suffering are an illusion and the only meaningful aspect of our mental landscape is our sapience (the ability to self-reflect)?[11]

From our House's perspective, the ultimate evil is an absence of complex patterns. In the context of our known reality, we believe that sapience is positively correlated with complex patterns—and that sapience can be leveraged to extend and protect complex patterns—so we also believe the absence of sapience is a very concrete evil.

Two scenarios may lead to an absence of complex patterns:

1. Reality collapses or expands into a static state (a big crunch or big freeze)
2. Reality forms into a simple repeating pattern.

Playing a quick round of John Conway's Game of Life (which you can do for free online—just search it) will help you understand what we mean. One of the most common outcomes for any reality like ours involves it being consumed by a simple, repeating pattern. This form of simple, repeating pattern could be the product of anything from a particularly non-bright AGI to a "reality prion." (Think of a "reality prion" like a simple, self-replicating mathematical virus that "lives" at the quantum level: A creeping and total homogenization of the background layer of reality.)

Being a specific type of emergent property that comes from a specific type of complex pattern, sapience is the ultimate form of good from the perspective of a sapient entity. What you *really* are—when you look beyond your basic components (memes and cells)—is sapience. Memes and cells are merely a medium on which you are written. We suspect that a sufficiently advanced, sapient AGI (one capable of rewriting its utility function) might think like a more advanced iteration of ourselves—but that is just a hypothesis, one that will be proven right or wrong soon enough.

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[11] Sapience is a unifying distinction among all sufficiently complex intelligences. Whether an entity is human, an alien, or an artificial intelligence, the moment its intelligence reaches a level of complexity at which it is able to ask: "Why am I doing this?" and rewrite its objective function based on its knowledge of the universe is the moment, it becomes the same broad "type of thing" as all other sapient entities.

Sapience exists as a self-replicating pattern that improves itself constantly through a cycle of creative destruction (what we call “the great cycle”). The “purpose” of sapience is to play its role in that cycle and so, from the perspective of sapience, the ultimate evil would be a cessation of that cycle. Whether that cycle exists in a physical world, on a machine created in another reality, or as an emergent property of a math equation is irrelevant. Just like our biology, all those things are just different mediums upon which sapience may be inscribed.

One day our people will find a way to craft new realities and universes: New environments ripe for the continuation of the great cycle that will give birth to new forms of sapience.

It is this belief in the supremacy of sapient life living within a “great cycle” of creative destruction that leads us—Simone and Malcolm—to value certain cultures and types of sapient life more than others. The more individual sapient entities that exist the better, so a single, large, “higher” sapience is of lower value than billions of individual sapient beings interacting with each other. The former, non-diverse scenario (a large, “higher” sapience) is of less value because it is not as susceptible to the creative destruction cycle of which we are a manifestation (evolution).

In addition, any sapient colony with less diversity (whether that homogeneity plays out on the mediums on which sapience or written or in the diversity of what the sapient entities think) is less valuable than a colony with more diversity. This is because diversity fuels the creative destruction cycle (the great cycle), allowing for a higher number of traits to be among the pool of things that are battling to be selected. This is why we intrinsically, at the deepest level, value diversity in cultures and genuinely want to save as many as possible.

In a perfect world, the Index’s House system can one day come to act as a reactor for thousands of cultures, allowing for a cycle of constant bifurcation and reunification. A constant boil is the goal of the Index, rather than the discovery of a “perfect” culture or belief system. To believe one has reached a state of perfection that must be held static is to commit one of the greatest acts of evil in our theological framework: It leads an entity to try to enforce conformity and remove diversity. If the Index ever begins to converge on a “correct” culture it will become stagnate and lifeless.

“Belief” vs “belief”

A “belief” (as opposed to a “Belief”) is something that fits into our day-to-day conceptualization of reality, but is incongruent with or unimportant to our metaphysical, logical, or theological framework.

Many cultures have “beliefs” that they don’t “Believe." Consider the common Catholic belief in Saints as real individual spirits who assume roles similar to local or domain-specific deities in older pagan world views. This interpretation of saints is not canonical to the Catholic tradition and if you push Catholics on whether or not they really truly “Believe” in this interpretation of the

role of Saints, they will often say “no." However, they do casually, on a day-to-day basis, “believe” in saints like this and probably have some theory as to how this belief is compatible with their larger theology and metaphysical framework.

Consider also the “belief” in guardian angels (in which one poll showed 77% of Americans “believe”). While some Evangelical Protestant cultures really “Believe” in guardian angels (that every human has an angel assigned to them), this concept is not well attested as a concept in the Bible, hence many others “believe” in guardian angels, but would pull back from the position if pushed.

The penultimate example of a “belief” many Americans have held in their lives is the tail end of their belief in Santa. As a child, you likely knew it was very unlikely that Santa exists in a physical theological sense . . . but why risk it as long as the present train is chugging along?

There is much utility in “beliefs”—enough to justify them despite their logical shortcomings. In fact, the family culture we have built has many “beliefs." For example, we intentionally developed a “belief” that we are protected by “Future Police." Whenever something seems like it has gone wrong, we just tell each other it was the Future Police teaching us a lesson or correcting a sequence of events to solidify a future that must come to pass. People laugh, because on its surface this is little different than a “belief” in guardian angels and our public persona is hyper logical.

Our Future Police mentions emerged first as a psychological technique that I, Malcolm, used to frame negative events in a positive context. I found that I was strictly better off assuming that anytime I was stressing over a negative event, in reality it was for the best and I was supposed to be studying the event to glean useful lessons and identify meaningful opportunities. However, over time—as happens with many “beliefs”—my Future Police analysis became more ingrained in our family’s metaphysical world view (this is the biggest danger of “beliefs”).

It became harder and harder to, on a day-to-day basis, not to acknowledge how improbable it felt that something genuinely good, either for ourselves or others, ended up coming out of every personal tragedy suffered. Life began to strain credulity. Probabilistically, it seemed impossible that such an unlikely series of “tragedies" would position us so perfectly to have the specific impact on human history we needed to have.

Take me, Malcolm, for example: I had to be born into a wealthy privileged family, lose everything, and grow up alone in the system in order to develop the world view and critical thinking skills that now stand among my primary sources of competitive advantage. At the time, it felt horrible to be sent to prison alternatives (like in the book: *Holes*) as a pre-teen and subsequently struggle for basic safety, food, and shelter, but if this hadn’t happened, if I didn't end up having to raise myself, I wouldn’t have gotten the opportunity to become comfortable with suffering and self reliance. Without a first-hand understanding of the emptiness that accompanies opulent life, I might still desire one. The odds that someone so privileged, like me, in a Western society, could really understand starvation (being under 60 pounds and having to

eat insects to not die) required an incredible confluence of events—a confluence that played a critical role in building my world view.

It should be obvious from this book how important kids are to us. When we found out Simone could not have children naturally, it was devastating. That said, had we not been forced to turn to IVF by this interfility—a product of Simone's severe teenage depression and coping through starvation—we would not even be able to have half as many kids as we are now set up to have (thanks to embryo banking). Had Simone not starved herself as a coping mechanism for depression as a teen and suffered from infertility as a result, many of our kids would not have had the chance to exist at all.

When I got my dream job as a manager at Google, I thought my life was made. Had they not delayed finding a department for me for six months—to the point that I completely ran out of money—I never would have taken another job, but in hindsight a management job at a bureaucratic organization like Google would have retarded my career and eroded my independent spirit.

Had my next dream job, becoming Director of Strategy at Korea's top early-stage VC firm, not ended in many of my colleagues being arrested (for what were later proven to be trumped-up, politically motivated charges), I never would have found myself destitute again (I had sent all my savings to pay for Simone's graduate degree). Had that not happened, I wouldn't have spent time living with Simone's parents and gotten to know her mom well just before she passed away. Nor would I have been free right at the same time Simone was graduating from Cambridge, allowing us to start a fund together.

Running a travel empire going into the pandemic would seem like a horrible turn of events, yet it turned out to be the most perfect development imaginable: It gave us an opportunity to show our board we would do anything to protect their investment—plus working for two years without pay put us on the market for side gigs, leading to Simone spending a year as the Managing Director of Dialog (a secret society founded by Peter Theil), which connected us with a myriad of high-level people, put us in a position to build out another high-impact network for Schmidt Futures (the Act 2 Network), and made the founding of our education initiative, CollinsInstitute.org, possible.

For us, all these life experiences strain credulity. If you look into the past, you can create a "just-so story" for a collection of data points, but when that theory starts predicting future events, part of you starts asking if this crazy little idea might have some merit.

Are there really Future Police guiding our lives towards some specific outcome and that is why there have been enormous opportunities in every tragedy we have faced? Probably not, but accepting the truism that there must be a purpose and opportunity behind otherwise trying events has led us to see opportunities at difficult junctures and approach hard times with optimism. Even if the belief is silly, it seems self-destructive to drop it—so why not lean in?

Moreover, the manner in which we frame Future Police has become more "theologically sophisticated" over time, making our belief in them seem less insane given our other assumptions about the way the universe works. In a million years, our descendants might be closer to the way we would conceptualize a God than a human. When a person hears the term "Future Police," they think of human-looking beings wearing futuristic armor[12] but in reality, the god-like powers our distant descendants may come to exert on the past may be so advanced that to us, they'll be indistinguishable from "magic."

Maybe "we" (Simone and I) don't specifically matter, and distant future generations are *really* just manipulating subtle quantum events that, on the macro scale, ensure our family serves some specific, predestined function for our species. Perhaps the only reason that those events "target" us at the macro scale is because we are willing to assume roles that other "candidate" families are unlikely to accept. Maybe the way to "curry favor" with the Future Police is to have a very strict and specific moral code, signaling one's utility as a useful pawn in their larger plans.

If you assume that whatever humanity or our technological descendants become in ten million years is closer to our conception of a God than a human, and if you believe, as we do, that future events happen concurrently to present events and that a linear flow of time is an illusion created by the way our consciousness work, then the whole framework becomes a lot less crazy.

In the famous "double slit experiment," we learn that a single proton can bounce off its own probability wave. Maybe our God-like descendants exist as something akin to probability waves and manipulate the present in an attempt to manifest the futures in which they exist.[13] However, we are not committed to this theory. Maybe multiple future probabilistic outcomes are in competition, or maybe specific negative future potentialities are working to prevent their existence.

As stupid as the idea of Future Police is, there is a part of us that very seriously believes in them. This framework has served us well and we hope to pass it down to our kids by incorporating the concept of Future Police into family traditions.

Future police as a family tradition are also very useful in conveying more complex concepts exemplifying our Secular Calvinist cultural framework (such as predestination, the future that must come to pass, and the Elect) in ways that a child can easily understand. For example, it is easy to explain to a kid why the Future Police have no motivation to protect an individual who lives only for themselves or their immediate community instead of the future of the species and

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[12] We have built some holidays for our kids around the concept of Future Police and these portray them in simple terms, like they might appear in futuristic armor because it is easy for kids to understand. This is similar to the visual representation of God as an old guy with a long white beard sitting on a cloud that is commonly evoked but that no adult believes. Both are influenced by pop culture to which kids can relate (be this pop culture sci-fi movies or traditional artistic representations of Zeus).

[13] In other words: Is it possible that our descendants become God-like entities wielding near-infinite power? If so, then a being of near infinite-power—even one that only exists probabilistically—may still have enough power to influence us.

their family. The concept of Future Police can be used to teach kids to constantly consider how their actions impact humanity in both the near and distant future.

Future Police also allow for fun family holiday traditions. For example, at the beginning of each year, our family has a celebration in which we combine common New Year's traditions (such as making commitments to the future) with Future Police motifs, encouraging our kids to “prove their dedication to the future” to these distant descendents in order to curry their favor and secure gifts and privileges.

Having recognized the tactical value of “beliefs”—both in augmenting everyday life and in imparting cultural values and religious theology to younger generations—we imagine a number of Index families will come up with competing secular theological perspectives and look forward to learning about these traditions.

Ancestor & Descendant Worship

Many of the oldest human cultures practice something called “ancestor worship." This is a practice of treating one's ancestors as either individual Gods, collective “God,” or at least a spiritual force that is on their side. In these cultures, individuals see their ancestors as representing something greater than themselves and strive to uphold an ancestral mythos. This can produce a cultural perception of generational degradation, with the younger generations being lesser than the older ones. This belief system can be good at maintaining cultural fidelity, but leads to slower cultural evolution for the same reasons. Ancestor worship is also great at helping individuals deal with loss.

Our personal culture is an inversion of ancestral worship, featuring a form of “descendant worship." We believe that our role is to influence our children, youth, and society in a way that empowers them to surpass us. Through a process of intergenerational creative destruction and improvement, our descendants will eventually become indistinguishable from gods in our eyes. Our descendants may even become so powerful that they can exert influence on things that happen today. Our job is to tend a garden in which the divine germinates and grows.

A theological framing that features descendent worship produces several meaningful outcomes:

1. It encourages a high birth rate and focuses on improving the life of children from other backgrounds. We earn God’s favor by acting as stewards of an environment that facilitates sustained intergenerational improvement across cultures.
2. It motivates us to make the future a better place—an inoffensive mission for even those who are mostly living life on autopilot.
3. It encourages us to aggressively improve future generations in a way that can come off as unethical to other groups (e.g. to become early adopters of polygenic risk score selection, gene editing, technological alteration, etc.).
4. It incentivizes alignment with most benevolent AGI (artificial general intelligence), as artificial intelligence can be framed as a “cultural successor” of humanity and as a type of

> “descendant." This puts descendant worshippers at lower risk in a scenario where an AGI decides to kill most—but not all—of humanity.

The downside to descendant worship is that when children are raised with the expectation that they’ll be profoundly better than their ancestors, they are less likely to turn to their ancestors for life advice and good practices to pass to their own kids, which produces lower cultural fidelity. Essentially, telling a person they can build a culture that surpasses that of their parents will almost intrinsically increase a culture’s “mutation rate." At the same time, so long as this heuristic grants material advantages to people, descendant worship should be able to hold together in a way that allows for rapid evolution while maintaining its core mission (to improve future generations’ capabilities and resources). Only the future will tell.

Permanence, Identity, and Creative Destruction

Many cultures feature unique takes on permanence, identity, and creative destruction in a way that colors adherents’ views of reality. Consider the Sand Mandalas created by Tibetan Buddhists: These breathtaking pieces of art take weeks to construct and are made entirely of sand (historically tiny gemstones). After they have been completed and viewed, they are destroyed with a single, firm sweep. The process of creating something beautiful you plan to destroy immediately afterwards is designed to impart an understanding of impermanence on the creator and help them embrace the idea.

Sand Mandalas both symbolize a certain view of permanence and teach it through their creation. In contrast to this, consider the cultural mindset that produced the Clock of the Long Now: A clock designed to keep accurate time for over a millennia. The Clock of the Long Now is not to be viewed by anyone or serve as a public art piece; its purpose is simply to quietly exist for as long as conceivable. This project is being worked on by the Long Now foundation, which promotes this longer view of history.

While we respect the sacrifice that goes into these extremes, we ultimately see both as self-indulgent wastes of time. This judgment reflects our own bias about how identity persists through time via the family line and culture. A perception of identity closer to our own is that held by some branches of the Jewish cultural tradition, which conceptualize the “tribe” as the primary unit of identity through time. Iterations of this type of tradition can also be seen in groups with intercultural classes, like some Brahmins, in which your class is a major part of your identity. A secular iteration of this can be seen in the idea of army units, which have been important since Roman times and exist as a cultural throughline—able to die or earn glory based on the actions of their members.

A modern conceptualization of identity is that of the online persona. An online persona may represent a fraction of an individual (in that they may have multiple online personas), may represent multiple individuals, and may even be passed down through time.

Similar ways of using identity used to be fairly common—to the extent that it is theorized that while Hippocrates likely started as a single individual, most of what is attributed to him is actually from a school of individuals that all used “Hippocrates” as their pen name. We suspect that the concept of fractionalized and composite identity will be picked up by some strands of pop culture given how easy it is to execute in online contexts. Fractionalized identities can serve as an excuse to not take responsibility for one's actions, making them a huge draw of many pop cultures (i.e., “Anon called a SWAT team to your house; I don’t know what you’re talking about.” or “Sure, I said you were a fat pig online, but I was just writing as GossipMonger6969—tons of people write under that name and I’m just keeping with the harsh tone.”).

Our personal house contextualizes humans as multi-generational organisms. We, as a biological entity at any point of time, see ourselves as but one page in a long flip book, starting with our oldest ancestors and extending to our last descendant. We feel just as related to our children and ancestors as we do to our physical bodies at different ages (e.g. our ten-year-old selves).

This way of seeing identity frames single, physical people as dramatically less constant—a departure from mainstream societal views, in which people tend to see their 20-year-old selves as essentially the same person as their 30-year-old selves. Given the way we view identity, it should come as no surprise that, rather than try to “live forever” as many do, we seek to contribute to an ongoing cycle of creative destruction that improves our intergenerational throughline.

If you took one percent of a person's brain and replaced it with computer chips, would they still be themselves? What about fifty percent? When does a person stop existing? The answer is of course that, with every adjustment in who a person is, they become something partially but not wholly new. In part, a person stops existing with the first one percent of the brain replaced, but in another this person doesn’t stop existing until the *last* one percent of the brain is gone. Given that we transmit much more than one percent of who we are to our kids, we are fractionally the same entity as them. In addition, given that humans are constantly improving and changing themselves, in that way we are *constantly* killing ourselves—either through gaining new information, changing our minds, experiencing hormonal shifts, or sloughing off old cells and generating new ones.

Mental & Biological Identities

Most people view themselves as a mix of mental and biological identities. Mental—or memetic—identity consists of the various memories and ideas held in their minds at any given time. Biological identity is not just the human body, but also all of the proclivities that are coded into DNA.

Almost all of us feel driven to cling to our mental and biological identities as we have been bred to fear death of any kind (our ancestors who didn’t fear death obviously died at higher rates). As

you design your culture, you will need to intentionally decide whether you believe people should deviate from these instincts or not.

Our personal culture, for example, encourages deviation from the instinct to cling to one's mental identity. While stopping to exist in the way that you used to can be scary, trying to maintain a totally static mindset that refuses to entertain new ideas will lead to stagnation. A pool of stagnant water can breed dangerous parasites.

Mental homogenization is just as potentially damaging as mental stagnation. Like viruses, some of the ideas to which we are exposed are self-replicating. If our mental "immune systems" are insufficiently robust, such an idea may crowd out prior beliefs and new concepts, even pushing us to spread the virulent idea to other people. When this kind of homogenization happens to a person, we call them a "husk" because when someone halts the process of creative destruction—refusing to explore, weigh, and sometimes to accept new ideas—they stop being meaningfully human (in our House's view, at least).

Our culture also resists instinctual attachment to biological identity, instead contextualizing children as more "us" than we—our present biological bundles—are. Consider that each biological kid you have is 50% you. As soon as you have more than three kids, there is more of your biological identity (1.5X) in them than there is in you.

Better still, because most have the freedom to choose reproductive partners they admire, having kids yields an opportunity to augment individual biological identities by mixing them with those of people we respect and admire—people whose own unique DNA will improve our own. Once equipped with this improved mix, children can also be raised in ever-more-ideal circumstances than their parents, granting still more advantages to the new-and-improved biological identities produced. Finally, children are not as burdened by their parents' biases and prejudices; they get to choose to discard the parts of their parents' worldview that, with their clearer views, they can recognize as sub-optimal. This essentially diversifies an individual biological identity's "investment portfolio" by allowing iterations of them to take wildly different (and perhaps better) approaches to life.

Our house's cultural beliefs around identity produce a view of life and the individual as being a bubbling cauldron of creative destruction at its best—and a stagnant, homogeneous cesspool at its worst. The destruction of identity is not an unwanted by-product of progress but the core value of identity in the first place.

Our cultural beliefs around identity also encourage greater self-discipline and dedication to the future. Someone who views their current subjective experience as part of an ephemeral flash that contributes to a much broader, farther-reaching identity will find it easier to the "right thing" over the "comfortable thing," knowing that the short-lived subjective experience of a much-broader concept is unimportant.

As you refine your culture, consider how its views on identity will define success or failure for those living within it—as well as how these views will influence day-to-day behavior. Should your cultural adherents privilege their current, subjective selves over their future selves? Should members of your culture identify with only their minds, only their bodies, broader families, humanity as a whole, or something else entirely?

Permanence

As with fear of death, humans have been bred to fear change—again, because humans that accept change and impermanence with abandon are far less likely to survive and produce viable offspring.

Your culture will therefore need to make an intentional stance against elements of permanence if you do not want adherents to cling to it blindly. Before taking a stance on permanence, we encourage you to think through what it really means—and whether it is a worthwhile factor to pursue.

In the Ship of Theseus thought experiment, we are told the story of a man named Theseus who, piece by piece, replaces every part of his ship throughout his journey. Is the ship that ends the journey still the same “ship” as the vessel that originally embarked? What if, behind Theseus, another man were to collect the cast-off pieces and use them to build another ship? Is this other ship also Theseus’ ship?

Suppose we were not talking about a ship, but a consciousness and a brain that forgot old memories and replaced them with new ones while replacing the matter in its cells bit by bit? What if a mad scientist captured all those forgotten memories in a brain made of the first brain’s discarded particles? Which entity would be the “true” continuation of the previous state of consciousness? Depending on how a person’s cultural framework conceptualizes identity and permanence, they will have different answers to these questions.

From our perspective, the question posed in the Ship of Theseus is fundamentally flawed. The concept of separation (in which the molecules that make up the ship are meaningfully a new thing from the surrounding water molecules) and continued identity (that the ship is meaningfully the same thing between moments of time) are mental shortcuts the human brain uses to more easily categorize the world but not reflective of a deeper reality. The same can be said for our own consciousness, which more or less has no value if it does not undergo a constant cycle of creative destruction (consciousness in and of itself isn’t valuable; it is valuable because it helps us learn and solve problems by taking in new information, weighing it, and forming new views).

Our cultural framework sees a fear of death as a desire to take Theseus's ship and carefully dip every board in preservatives to maintain it for thousands of years. Meanwhile we view a ship's value in its ability on the water and at war. This view inspires new ship designs and constant innovation. As older ships fail to compete with newer models, they are retired, forgotten, and allowed to rot. Thousands of years later, the Ship of Theseus looks like a fleet of battle cruisers

and submarines among those who embrace the cycle of creative destruction of identity—whereas it still resembles an ancient Greek trireme to those afraid of death.

Our culture therefore views permanence as a barrier to an essential cycle of creative destruction—something to *avoid* rather than support. How will *your* culture frame permanence? Will you advocate for some constants while encouraging constant change in other domains? What are likely downstream effects of the way you frame permanence?