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1 Part 1: The Office According to “The Office”

The Gervais Principle

- Supersedes the Peter Principle (Office Space) and the Dilbert Principle
- Related books: “The Organization Man”[?], “Images of Organization”[?]

1.1 From The Whyte School to The Gervais Principle

Hugh MacLeod’s cartoon, “Company Hierarchy”[?]

while most management literature is about striving relentlessly towards an ideal by executing organization theories completely, this school, which I’ll call the Whyte school, would recommend that you do the bare minimum organizing to prevent chaos, and then stop. Let a natural, if declawed, individualist Darwinism operate beyond that point. The result is the MacLeod hierarchy.

Whyte, in his “The Organization Man”, suggested a layer of middle managers (the Organization Man) were in some way dominant influencers in comparison to the power brokers at the top.

He was wrong, but not in the way you’d think. The Sociopaths defeated the Organization Men and turned them into The Clueless not by reforming the organization, but by creating a meta-culture of Darwinism in the economy: one based on job-hopping, mergers, acquisitions, layoffs, cataclysmic reorganizations, outsourcing, unforgiving start-up ecosystems, and brutal corporate raiding.

The MacLeod lifecycle of firms:

- Organizations start with a Sociopath recruiting just enough Losers to get stuff done
- with some success, Clueless are needed to control the reaction: explosions fire in cylinders so that pistons are moved and not destroyed
- Eventually, the proportion of Clueless is too high: the organization is brittle and bureaucratic.
- If anything of value remains, remaining Sociopaths split/reapportion it into a new effort

Losers: primarily losers in the economic sense: “They’ve given up some potential for long-term economic liberty (as capitalists) for short-term economic stability. Traded freedom for a paycheck in short. They actually produce, but are not compensated in proportion to the value they create (since their compensation is set by Sociopaths operating under conditions of serious moral hazard)”

Sociopaths “enter and exit organizations at will, at any stage, and do whatever it takes to come out on top.”

Losers “are the happiness seekers, rather than will-to-power players, and enter and exit reactively, in response to the meta-Darwinian trends in the economy.”

“The Clueless are the ones who lack the competence to circulate freely through the economy (unlike Sociopaths and Losers), and build up a perverse sense of loyalty to the firm, even when events make it abundantly clear that the firm is not loyal to them. ... Unless squeezed out by forces they cannot resist, they hang on as long as possible”

1.2 The Gervais Principle and Its Consequences

The Gervais Principle: Sociopaths, in their own best interests, knowingly promote over-performing losers into middle-management, groom under-performing losers into sociopaths, and leave the average bare-minimum-effort losers to fend for themselves.

The Peter Principle: “all people are promoted to the level of their incompetence.”

“The Peter Principle is wrong for the simple reason that executives aren’t that stupid, and because there isn’t that much room in an upward-narrowing pyramid.”

The Dilbert Principle: “companies tend to systematically promote their least-competent employees to middle management to limit the damage they can do.”

1.2.1 The Career of the Clueless

Why is promoting over-performing Losers logical? The simple reason is that if you over-perform at the Loser level, it is clear that you are an idiot. You've already made a bad bargain, and now you're delivering more value than you need to, making your bargain even worse. Unless you very quickly demonstrate that you know your own value by successfully negotiating more money and/or power, you are marked out as an exploitable clueless Loser.

A Loser who can be suckered into bad bargains is set to become one of the Clueless. That's why they are promoted: they are worth even more as Clueless pawns in the middle than as direct producers at the bottom, where the average, rationally-disengaged Loser will do. At the bottom, the overperformers can merely add a predictable amount of value. In the middle they can be used by the Sociopaths to escape the consequences of high-risk machinations like re-orgs.

1.2.2 The Career of the Sociopath

The future Sociopath must be an under-performer at the bottom. Like the average Loser, he recognizes that the bargain is a really bad one. Unlike the risk-averse loser though, he does not try to make the best of a bad situation by doing enough to get by. He has no intention of just getting by. He very quickly figures out through experiments and fast failures that the Loser game is not worth becoming good at. He then severely under-performs in order to free up energy to concentrate on maneuvering an upward exit. He knows his under-performance is not sustainable, but he has no intention of becoming a lifetime-Loser employee anyway. He takes the calculated risk that he'll find a way up before he is fired for incompetence.

1.2.3 The Career of the Loser

The most rational thing to do is slack off and do the minimum necessary. Doing more would be a Clueless thing to do. Doing less would take the high-energy machinations of the Sociopath, since it sets up self-imposed up-or-out time pressure. So the Loser really not a loser at all if you think about it pays his dues, does not ask for much, and finds meaning in his life elsewhere.

1.2.4 The Emergence of the MacLeod Hierarchy

Dastardly as all this sounds, it is actually pretty efficient, given the inevitability of the MacLeod hierarchy and life cycle. The Sociopaths know that the only way to make an organization capable of survival is to buffer the intense chemistry between the producer-Losers and the leader-Sociopaths with enough Clueless padding in the middle to mitigate the risks of business. Without it, the company would explode like a nuclear bomb, rather than generate power steadily like a reactor. On the other hand, the business wouldn't survive very long without enough people actually thinking in cold, calculating ways. The average-performing, mostly-disengaged Losers can create diminishing-margins profitability, but not sustainable performance or growth. You need a steady supply of Sociopaths for that, and you cannot waste time moving them slowly up the ranks, especially since the standard promotion/development path is primarily designed to maneuver the Clueless into position wherever they are needed. The Sociopaths must be freed up as much as possible to actually run the business, with or without official titles.

1.3 The Organization as Psychic Prison

Of the eight systemic metaphors in the book [Gareth Morgan's, "Images of Organization"], the one that is most relevant here is the metaphor of an organization as a psychic prison. The image is derived from Plato's allegory of the cave, which I won't get into here. Suffice it to say that it divides people into those who get how the world really works (the Sociopaths and the self-aware slacker Losers) and those who don't (the over-performer Losers and the Clueless in the middle).

Here is the ultimate explanation of Michael Scott's (and David Brent's) careers: they are put into a position of having to explain their own apparent, unexpected and unexamined success. It is easy to explain failure. Random success is harder. Remember, they are promoted primarily as passive pawns to either allow the Sociopaths to escape the risks of their actions, or to make way for the Sociopaths to move up faster. They are presented with an interesting bit of cognitive dissonance: being nominally given greater power, but in reality being safely shunted away from the pathways of power. They must choose to either construct false narratives or decline apparent opportunities.

2 Part 2: Posturetalk, Powertalk, Babytalk and Gametalk

Four languages:

- Posturetalk: Clueless → everybody
- Powertalk: Sociopath → Sociopath
- Babytalk: Losers → Clueless; Sociopath → Clueless
- Gametalk: Losers → Losers

2.1 The Calculus of Organizational Dynamics

The Gervais Principle operates at the slow tempo of promotions, demotions, layoffs and hirings.

Among themselves, Losers speak a language called Gametalk. This is the only language that has been properly studied and documented. I won't cover it at all, but you can learn all about it in the pop classics on Transactional Analysis (TA, a Neo-Freudian school) from 30 years ago (now available in updated editions): Eric Berne's "Games People Play" and "What Do You Say after You Say Hello" and Thomas Harris' "I'm OK You're OK".

Sociopaths and Losers speak rarely to each other at all. One of the functions of the Clueless, recall, is to provide a buffer in what would otherwise be a painfully raw master-slave dynamic in a pure Sociopath-Loser organization. But when they do talk, they actually speak an unadorned language you could call Straight Talk if it were worth naming. It is the ordinary (if rare) utilitarian language of the sane, with no ulterior motives flying around.

2.2 The Elements of Powertalk

2.2.1 Fluent Powertalk

coy, cautious, leaving room for plausible deniability

using information asymmetry to establish dominance or to create an opening for negotiation

2.2.2 A Powertalk Trainwreck

2.3 The Characteristics of Powertalk

Multiple layers of meaning are not what make Powertalk unique. Irony and sarcasm are modes of layered communication available to anybody. ... What distinguishes Powertalk is that with every word uttered, the power equation between the two speakers shifts just a little. Sometimes both gain slightly, at the expense of some poor schmuck. Sometimes one yields ground to the other. Powertalk in other words, is a consequential language.

"When the Clueless or Losers talk, on the other hand, nothing really changes. ... Even in the rare cases where exploitable information is exchanged, its value is not recognized or reflected in the exchange."

Card-playing analogy: "In Powertalk, you play with money (the currency is most often reality-information). In the other languages you are playing with no stakes. The most important enabling factor in being able to speak Powertalk is simply the possession of table stakes."

"The bulk of Sociopath communication takes place out in the open, coded in Powertalk, right in the presence of non-Sociopaths"

Sociopaths are in fact more careful in private. Why? ... for Sociopaths, conditions of conflict of interest and moral hazard are not exceptional. They are normal, everyday situations. To function effectively they must constantly maintain and improve their position in the ecosystem of other Sociopaths, protecting themselves, competing, forming alliances, trading favors and building trust. Above all they must be wary of Sociopaths with misaligned agendas, and protect themselves in basic ways before attempting things like cooperation. They never lower their masks. In fact they are their masks. There is nothing beneath.

"effective Sociopaths stick with steadfast discipline to the letter of the law, internal and external, because the stupidest way to trip yourself up is in the realm of rules where the Clueless and Losers get to be judges and jury members. What they violate is its spirit, by taking advantage of its ambiguities."

2.4 How Not to Learn Powertalk: Toy Guns and Treacle

2.4.1 Toy Guns

"Toy Guns is the vocabulary of empty machismo."

2.4.2 Treacle

“Treacle is a vocabulary drawn from apparently win-win/play nice frameworks, but deployed with adversarial intent.”

Phyllis attempts to use textbook “nice” manipulation methods (such as “active listening” and “effective feedback”) ... when a bad-faith incompetent like Phyllis attempts to use the technique to deflect a tirade from an angry Sociopath with no reason to be nice, initiating the “effective feedback” psychology parlor game is about the same as putting on a sign labeled “Kick Me!”

2.4.3 Why the Textbook Material Fails

“It is not that the tactics themselves are misguided, but that their application by non-Sociopaths is usually useless, for three reasons.”

“you have to decide what tactics to use and when, based on a real sense of the relative power and alignment of interests with the other party, which the Losers and Clueless typically lack.”

“your application of even the most subtle textbook tactics can be predicted and easily countered by any Sociopath who has also read the same book.”

“tactics make sense only in the context of an entire narrative (including mutual assessments of personality, strengths, weaknesses and history) of a given interpersonal relationship.”

“Both the Clueless and Losers are too self-absorbed to put in much work developing accurate and usable mental models of others. The result is one-size-fits-all-situations tactical choices which are easily anticipated and deflected.”

“your moves have to be backed up by appropriate bets using your table stakes, exposing you to real risks and rewards.”

“A good way to remember this is to think of Powertalk as decisions about what verbal tactics to use when, and with what. The answer to with what is usually a part of your table-stakes. The stuff you are revealing and risking. If you cannot answer with what? you are posturing. You are not speaking Powertalk.”

2.5 The Art of Powertalk

“Even in the hands of fluent Powertalkers with an understanding of their own credibility, command of the language is simply not a formulaic or procedural skill. It is a thinking skill.”

“You learn through real Powertalk conversations with other Sociopaths. Betting real stakes (information, credibility, labor and literal dollar money). You get played for a sucker a few times along the way before you wise up.”

Skills worth practicing

- storytelling [?] “With enough practice (a LOT), this gives you big-picture control over conversations.”
- phrasing
“Low-level utterance-by-utterance control is much harder, and the one thing you cannot do is engineer 7-8 meanings and calibrated amounts of power and leverage into every line you utter, through careful word choice.”
- timing
“In most conversations, you have tenths of a second per response. In that time you must steer the tempo of the conversation its rhythms, emotional subtext and energy level to affect power equations the way you want.” – see chp. 3 of “Tempo”[?]

3 Part 3: The Curse of Development

3.1 The Basic Prediction Problem

“How [can] an apparently win-win interaction change, without warning, into a win-lose interaction?”

Four major factors drive the outcomes of such interactions. They are: situational randomness (luck), situational information distribution (who knows what, and when), interaction history (which can be boiled down to interpersonal psychological debt and relative status at the start of an interaction) and relative levels of psychological development. In this post, we’ll only look at the dynamics of the last variable, which hides the most subtleties.

3.2 The Curse of Development

“the depth of any transaction is limited by the depth of the shallower party”

the curse of development: “If the situational developmental gap between two people is sufficiently small, the more evolved person will systematically lose more often than he/she wins.”

3.3 Arrested Development and Well-Adjustedness

arrested development: used to be used in real psychology, but not any longer, so now we can keep it for pop psychology :)
“arrested development: you are born Clueless and clue up in fits and starts. Bits of you get stuck and left behind at different points, and eventually you exhaust your capacity for real change and stall”
“Well-adjustedness is a measure of the degree to which your worldview is socially acceptable and appropriate in a given environment. Since a messed-up personality can be well-adjusted with respect to a messed-up environment, well-adjustedness has very little to do with sanity and actual mental health.”

The mental health industry is designed to manufacture well-adjustedness, not cure arrested development. This is partly because lack of well-adjustedness is easier to detect, measure and fix. But that is a minor reason. The major reason is that well-adjustedness is a definable and economically useful commodity that is relatively cheap to manufacture. The fix for arrested development is none of those things.

Environments and worldviews really come down to a series of situations and situational reactions. If your situational reactions are generally appropriate but against your best interests, you are a well-adjusted Loser. If they are both appropriate and in your best interests, you are a sociopath. If your reactions are inappropriate (whether or not they are in your best interests sometimes they are), you are Clueless.

3.4 The Three Laws of Arrested Development

three handy laws:

Your development is arrested by your strengths, not your weaknesses.

Arrested-development behavior is caused by a strength-based addiction

The mediocre develop faster than either the talented or the untalented

“An alternative way of looking at these three laws is to note that defense mechanisms emerge to sustain addictions even when the developmental environment that originally nourished it vanishes.”

3.5 The Curse Revisited, the Lettuce Explained

why you are likely to lose in the Curse of Development zone. Broadly, three forces are at work:

The less-developed person does not know what he/she does not know, and is typically attempting to operate from their regressed comfort zone of strength, which to you represents a zone of unrewarding mediocrity that you are attempting to leave/have left behind. This lends your opponent confidence.

Your own knowledge is fresh, unstable and not yet ingrained as second nature. You are acutely aware of, and anxious about, your beginner status in your new level. This makes you lack confidence.

To win through persuasion, you must teach (a superior-inferior transaction) without first reversing the default unfavorable status relationship (you: not confident, low-status, he/she: confident, high-status)

3.6 Reality-Distortion by the Clueless

the Clueless in The Office represent three sublevels of reality-distorting clueless delusions:

I am OK if Mommy applauds my performance (early childhood, Michael)

I am OK if I earn badges from teachers (pre-adolescence, Dwight)

I am OK if I can sit with the cool kids (adolescence, Andy)

3.6.1 Michael, the Child

“If they succeed too much, they get addicted to the typical adult reaction: Wow, aren’t you cute/clever? and, to a lesser extent, to admiration from younger siblings. In learning to thrive in this particular reward/penalty environment, little children rely mostly on responding to the emotional content of what they hear and see, since they do not understand much.”

Why is lack of originality a clear indicator of cluelessness? Here is why: delusions are closed logical schemes, where reality is mangled into the service of a fixed script through defense mechanisms, with the rest of the meaning thrown away. To manufacture original thought you have to look at/listen to reality in open ways for data. That is why Michael’s database is so full of movie lines. Movies are goldmines of canned situation-reactions that don’t require much present-reality data to retrieve. When kids quote adults or movies, they seem precocious, and gain approval.

3.6.2 Dwight, the Pre-Teen

3.6.3 Andy

“In adolescence, visible signs of acceptance aren’t formal medals and honors, but things like being given nicknames by peers, being a wingman to alpha males, being appreciated for “cool” extracurricular skills, and the like.”

3.7 Clueless-Clueless Interactions

3.8 The Clueless Economy

“I’ve used economics terms like winning/losing, zero-sum, and interpersonal debt, but keep in mind that all this is Monopoly money unless a Sociopath is involved. The language of winning and losing and debts is useful for all interactions, but it is only consequential, and capable of causing power shifts, when Sociopaths are involved.”

“the Clueless economy is fueled by a worthless currency, but this does not mean transactions do not occur. ... There are wins and losses, but relative positions do not change.”

4 Part 4: Wonderful Human Beings

4.1 Marxist Office Theory

“Groucho Marxist theory is the key to understanding Andy’s predicament. ... Marx provides the core idea we need in his famous line, “I don’t care to belong to any club that will have me as a member.””

“There is a deep truth here. Social clubs of any sort divide the world into an us and a them. We are better than them. Any prospective new member who could raise the average prestige of a club is by definition somebody who is too good for that club.”

Social groups form and change memberships in response to status illegibility: “the fuzziness of the status of a member of any social group”

Marx’s First Law of Status Illegibility: the illegibility of the status of any member of a group is proportional to his/her distance from the edges of the group.

Marx’s Second Law of Status Illegibility: the stability of the group membership of any member is proportional to the illegibility of his/her status.

The laws imply that in a group of ten people it is much easier, both for insiders and outsiders, to identify numbers 1 or 10 (alpha and omega) than it is to identify number 4 unambiguously. They also imply that alpha and omega are weakly attached to the group, while the obscure middle is stably attached (the two-way attraction/repulsion expected-value math is straightforward; work it out).

“Status illegibility is necessary to keep a group of losers stable. It is a deep form of uncertainty. I am not saying that there is a ranking that is just not known or knowable. I am saying there is no clear ranking to be known.”

Status illegibility is the key to the Marx paradox, and the foundation of every other aspect of Loser group dynamics (which is also all group dynamics, since forming groups is a loser activity). If your status is clear, and the status of the club is clear (by definition, the average status of all its current members) then either your status is higher, in which case the club will want you, but you won’t want to join, or your status is lower, in which case the opposite is true. If status were precisely known all around, then the only case that allows somebody to join a club is if their status exactly matches the average of the club. The probability of this happening is vanishingly small, even if status could be measured accurately and quantitatively. Worse, this benefits neither joiner or club.

But consider what happens when all you really know about the club is the range of status (lowest and highest). If you know you belong in the range (“that dude is cooler than me, but I am definitely cooler than that loser”), but have no idea whether your status is above or below the average, the uncertainty allows you to join. And your fealty to the group, and the group’s to you, will be in proportion to the legibility of your status. If events conspire to make status too legible, competitiveness is amplified, weakening group cohesion, and stabilizing dynamics kick in, restoring the illegibility, or the group breaks down.

Note that the legible limit points are necessary to provide basic calibration to new aspirants to membership, and to help Sociopaths value the social capital represented by the group, and negotiate terms with alphas with legitimate authority. The alpha and omega set the range. Both are by definition the most unstable members. The alpha can be tempted away into the illegible middle of a higher-ranking group, with more murky room to climb, while the omega might get sick of being the whipping boy (in mixed-sex situations, the omega is usually male) at the bottom, and move to a higher relative status in a lower group (both can also be tempted into Sociopathy

4.2 The Lake Wobegon Effect Reconsidered

“I began this post with an homage to Garrison Keilor’s Lake Wobegon, where “all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average.” Keilor’s classic nugget of mordant wit has since been used to bolster the theory of illusory superiority, a kind of delusion by which the mediocre convince themselves they are above average.”

This is a partially true explanation. Loser dynamics are largely driven by Lake-Wobegon-effect snow jobs, which obscure pervasive mediocrity. But unlike the delusions of the Clueless (false confidence of the Dunning-Kruger variety [...]), which are maintained through the furious efforts and desperate denials on the part of the deluded individuals themselves, Loser delusions are maintained by groups. You scratch my delusion, I’ll scratch yours. I’ll call you a thoughtful critic if you agree to call me a fascinating blogger. And we’ll both convince ourselves that our lives are to be valued by these different measures.

“Losers are too smart to fool themselves. They enter into social contracts which require them to fool each other.”

“This social contract requires them to play games. Games that work at two levels to create cohesion and social capital: they structure current, live situations, and they bolster redemptive life scripts (“I am special” stories). We need to understand status illegibility at both these levels.”

“At the life-script level, the game-playing social contract creates complete nominal illegibility. Each individual in a group is judged according to a custom life script that makes it impossible to compare two lives within the group.”

“Remember, you are unique, just like everybody else. And everybody is uniquely above average. This is why, paradoxically, collectivist philosophies that value equality must necessarily value diversity. Nobody wants to be equally average. Everybody must be given a chance to be equally above average. Sociopaths detect and get wary of this dynamic very quickly”

“the “uniqueness” game is a game of mutual delusion. In the big games of life, those involving the Darwinian dimensions of sex, money or power, we don’t get to define the rules. And it is only those games that can create social value.”

Which means that competitive Darwinian dynamics must also be present, in veiled form, within groups. [...] So all the social dynamics are about maintaining a delicate balance between mutual reinforcement of unique life scripts and comforting status uncertainty on the one hand (which requires status illegibility), and fighting veiled battles over sex, money and power (which fuel the engines of group value creation).

4.3 Joining and Leaving Groups

“[Andy’s stated strategy for gaining social acceptance by joining the right groups] (gaining status in a large group via membership in a subgroup) isn’t bad actually, but it is mistaken at two levels.”

“First, Andy mistakenly believes that there is a clear status hierarchy among groups in the office.”

“Actually the status illegibility effect is recursive, and applies to subgroups as well. In the mythos of American high schools as portrayed by Hollywood, the football team and cheer-leading squads are on top and the marching band is at the bottom, for instance. Do the Goth kids outrank the hackers? That is strictly unknowable.”

“Second, he treats membership as an audition process, whereby he can gain entree by offering proof of status.”

What Andy *actually* needs to do is offer proof of the right level of status *illegibility*. Yes, his music and other skills matter. But they merely create a vector of uniqueness for later use. *If* he gets in, that’s what the group will use to socially bolster his unique-and-above-average delusion. But to actually get in, he needs to demonstrate the right level of status illegibility, governed by the level he is aiming for. [...] A bid for any interior position must be made by demonstrating the right level of status illegibility.

“Status therefore, must first be successfully obscured during a membership bid. As with most group dynamics, membership bids are scripted in gametalk. How new members segue into existing group games is what determines their future.”

Once you’ve resorted to entering a group by co-opting the easily-won support of the omega, you’ve sent a very clear status signal. You only outrank the omega. Since this violates the requirement for some status illegibility around the $(\Omega - 1)$ position, Andy has now permanently marked himself as an outsider, and Kevin, through his injudicious support of Andy, has reinforced his position as omega

Why can’t Andy enter the group easily at a clear $(\Omega - 1)$ position? He is not useful as a safe calibration point (the group has already invested in making Kevin the omega), and he doesn’t raise the value of the group. Though there are no good examples in *The Office*, you can’t enter at #2 either. Only the alpha can legitimately confer the #2 title, and there is rarely a good reason for the alpha to do so unless he/she is planning to exit. For the alpha, keeping contenders guessing through unpredictable signs of favor is the best idea

“If you’d like more examples of how group entry works, read this fascinating article[?] on how bouncers make decisions about who to let into nightclubs. Obfuscated status signalling is key. The bouncers aren’t enforcing an illegible threshold as much as they are enforcing an illegible spread.”

“Exits work the same way. If an alpha or omega leaves, the new alpha or omega is plucked out of the illegible middle at that time. Not before. Succession planning may be a good idea in formal hierarchies, but it is a bad idea in social groups.”

“Finally, purely through internal dynamics, a group can become more or less legible. Status legibility can increase through clear status “overtake” events. A sub-group clique gaining too much power is another example. Status can also become *too* illegible when games get too too ritualized, and lose their social-capital generating ability.”

“Legibility is controlled by pulling individuals down or up through games, the adoption and abandonment of specific games, and the formation and break-up of sub-groups through open conflict (often catalyzed by external Sociopaths). We’ll only tackle highlights of all this.”

If this forced regression to the (above-average!) mean didn’t happen, the status would become increasingly legible and the group would disintegrate through vicious status competition. If the group were to become too illegible, vitality would be lost and games (which create new social capital) would ossify into sacramental rituals (which don’t). Groups must remain socially fluid to work. Fluidity is the other side of illegibility.

But where does the group get this power to pull down high-fliers and pull up the unfortunate? How can sub-groups be created or destroyed? How can games be retired and new games introduced? Groups achieve all these effects by withholding or awarding evidence of *social proof*. Social proof dynamics create social capital through existing games, legitimize/de-legitimize sub-groups (which play sub-cultural games, such as the little elitist games played by the Finer Things Club), and accept or reject new game scripts.

4.4 Social Proof and Social Capital

“All game-structured social dynamics are based on some social skill or the other. Since these games are skilled activities (such as improvising jokes or comforting a member who has suffered a loss), they can create value. This value accumulates as social capital.”

A social skill, such as joke-telling ability, is a behavior whose effectiveness is determined by the reaction of a group. A joke is funny if the audience laughs. A proven mathematical theorem remains true even if a billion people scream that it isn’t. Theorem proving is not a social skill in that sense. Like theorem-proving, social skills are *information* skills, since nothing tangible is produced besides an effect on others’ minds. Unlike theorem-proving though, the value of the product is based on *social proof* rather than *objective* proof. Social skills produce information; a social truth hypothesis (such as a joke). If it passes a social proof test, it becomes part of social capital (the grand narrative of the group).

In other words:

- Participant has and exercises *social skills*
- participant exercises social skills to generate *social truth hypotheses*
- social truth hypotheses are evaluated by group and their responses constitute *social proof*
- social proof distributes *social capital* among participants

“A social skill can rest on the foundation of an objective skill (as in the case of both humor and music), but the test of the skill lies not in the objective characteristics of what is produced, but in the reaction of the group to skillfully-timed deployment of the skills.”

Most forms of humor attempt to raise or lower status of individuals via game-like structures, with defined roles and a *structurally* predictable script (the surprise comes from the content). There is always a jokester, a victim (which can be the same person by design or accident) and crucially, an *audience*. The victim may or may not be present. So there are at least three roles in a piece of humor, of which the role of audience may be played by a group. This gives us three basic forms of humor.

4.4.1 Clueless (Two-Person) Humor

“If you attempt a joke with just one other person present, and you can are only capable of experiencing gratification if the other person laughs (social proof; majority of 2/2), you get a terminally stupid situation that only the Clueless will attempt to enact.”

In a two-person situation, you either get non-adversarial self-deprecation (which reinforces existing status), or an adversarial joke. Since social proof works by majority vote, two-person adversarial jokes cannot work unless the victim laughs at himself, accepting an insult. If the victim fights back, with no neutral audience to cast a laugh vote, you get a pointless game of oneupmanship [...]. That is why the humor is clueless. It boils down to he-said-she-said. Without a judge, there is no outcome, and there are no significant status movements.

4.4.2 Sociopath (One-Person) Humor

“One person humor is Sociopath humor, and is psychologically more complex. It can only happen when the jokester and *audience* are the same person (which replaces social proof with individual judgment), and everybody else present is a victim, often unaware that they are being made fun of. Andy Kauffman’s humor is an example.”

“Here, Jim doesn’t need anybody else to get why this is funny, not even Dwight. It is pure Sociopath play, a cat-mouse “pushing buttons” exercise in viciousness for private pleasure. Sociopath humor often possesses such push-button cruelty (and is “objective” humor in that sense, since the victim’s reaction validates an objective psychology hypothesis).”

4.4.3 Loser (Group) Humor

In Loser humor, as with Clueless humor, the “it is funny” validation comes via social proof from somebody other than the jokester (audience jokester victim). But unlike the two-person stalemate that is the norm in Clueless humor, Loser humor usually creates clear outcomes because democratic social proof can work. The smallest meaningful Loser group is three people (including some special cases where the victim is absent, and both jokester and audience laugh, providing a 2/3 social proof majority).

In general, the creation of social capital depends *entirely* on the reactions of the audience. What breaks the status stalemate in groups of three is that meaningful status movements can occur. The high can be pulled down, and the low can be pulled up. Due to status illegibility, bigger groups are even better, because you get the benefits of status-weighted social proofs without requiring clarity of status. If three people, who among them illegibly share ranks 3, 4 and 5, are present, then you can weight their collective laughter with a 4 and get accurate results.

Consider a simple three-person situation. A makes a joke at B’s expense. Without C present, you’d get Clueless dynamics. But if C is present, and he laughs, he bonds with the joke-teller and creates social capital in the bond of trust between them. If he frowns or otherwise indicates that the joke was in bad taste, he bonds with the victim and creates capital there. And crucially, if he does not react, *no social capital is created at all*.

4.5 Round and Round and Up and Down

“Among the Clueless, status stays static: you get the Michael > Dwight > Andy arrested development totem pole we examined last time. Among the Sociopaths, status is irrelevant. Table stakes and skill at using them is what matters. Sociopaths pay attention to what you have, and how well you bargain with it. Not who you are.”

But among Losers, status is real, and it matters. Within the limits of the status illegibility required for group stability, status churns through skilled Gametalk interactions. Humor causes status shifts among jokester, victim and audience. Net inflow of social capital occurs when the victim is out-group. Redistribution and appreciation/depreciation happen when the victim is in-group. Net outflows happen when an entire group is made victim by another individual or group within a larger, subsuming context (the football jocks making fun of the glee club, or Red Sox fans winning a bar room brawl with Yankees fans).

Clueless jokes are zero-sum, but Loser jokes are actually non-zero-sum. [...] This is a variety of non-zero-sum called mutual exploitation that is sadly under-studied by game theorists. It simply means you can create net positive value by taking turns beating each other up competitively (aside for game-theory geeks: in the iterated prisoner’s dilemma, you get mutual exploitation by breaking the constraint that the cooperation payoff must be higher than the average of the defection and sucker payoffs) . You can also create net-negative toxic non-zero-sum outcomes.

Among Losers, in specific situations, status may go up or down, but overall, it just goes round and round. There is no grand status hierarchy. Only a top, a bottom, and an illegible middle. Newcomers attempt to successfully lose themselves in the middle. Situational wins and losses create a turbulent churn that maintains the illegibility without creating any decisive movement within the group.

Who owns the social capital? That’s the beauty of the thing. Due to status illegibility (which would imply clear contribution/ownership weights), there can be no fair and equitable distribution. So the group can only deploy the capital collectively. Social capital is also generally illiquid anyway, except in aggregate forms. The trust between you and me, developed through banter and jokes, is of no use to a third party unless they hire us as a *team* to work together on something. I cannot take half of our mutual trust bond value and go sell it in the Sociopath marketplace for cash.

4.6 Empathy, or Why You Losers Cringe at Michael's Actions

We've been drilling deep into social dynamics, and we finally get to that one deeply human quality that makes all this possible. [...] All this complicated social psychology does not need to be explicitly understood. For high-empathy people, all this is natural. By participating in collective feeling in groups of any size, and reacting to basic attraction/aversion drives, you can actually safely navigate all the complexity by instinct.

Not only can you do this, you will actually feel *good* doing this. This feeling is called happiness. I don't have time to go into this, but happiness is *entirely* a social phenomenon, and there's plenty of evidence that the best way (and from my reading, the *only* way) to get happy is to get sociable. Non-social feelings that seem like happiness turn out, upon further examination, to be distinct emotions like contentment, equanimity or hedonistic pleasure.

"This isn't particularly surprising. Our brains are designed like our bodies: just as we possess backs that others can scratch more easily than us, our brains contain "backs," so to speak. That's where happiness lives, and is brought alive by empathic scratching."

Why do we use the word *cringe* to describe the peculiar brand of humor in "The Office"? Think about the word. You cringe when you anticipate pain. Physical cringing, such as the cowering reaction you instinctively produce when you realize your car is going to hit another car, or when you realize somebody is going to hit you, serves to mitigate the anticipated damage. You also cringe via empathic anticipation of *someone else's* impending pain. Watch yourself next you watch someone else about to get hit by a swinging door for instance. You will cringe.

Psychologically, you cringe when you realize you are committing a social *faux pas* and can expect a negative social-proof judgment. Again, this cringing helps you interrupt the offending behavior and try to recover. Empathic social cringing is even more effective among Losers, since you can watch my developing "embarrassed for you" reaction to moderate your own behavior in time.

empathic cringing causes a curious runaway effect when you have an (instinct-driven) Loser watching one of the Clueless begin to blunder socially. You cringe as you would in any social situation, but because the Clueless person is oblivious to the impending negative social judgment, *he or she blunders on anyway*. Your cringe naturally gets a lot more exaggerated. Imagine being in the passenger seat of a car about to crash, and driven by a slower-reacting driver. Your empathic slamming of the brakes will be exaggerated compared to if you were yourself at the wheel.

5 Part 5: Heads I Win, Tails You Lose (HIWTYL)

At the heart of all tragedy, the Greeks saw a phenomenon they called *hamartia*: a fatal error born of unavoidable ignorance. Combined with a fundamental moral flaw, hamartia inevitably led on to destruction. For the Greeks, humans were cursed not just with mortality of the flesh, but also hamartia-driven mortality of the spirit. Hamartia was the Gods being Divine Jerks, randomly toying with human lives for their own pleasure, through cat-and-mouse games the latter could not hope to win.

For the Greeks, any divine purpose, even subtly malicious randomness, in the ordering of the universe, was preferable to purposelessness. At least the gods cared enough to be cruel.

Nietzsche saw tragedy differently. For Nietzsche, God was dead and only the flesh was real. There was only the indifferent Great Bureaucrat of the material universe, Chancellor Entropy, apathetically offering humans a form to fill out, with just one simple check-box choice: "death or booga booga?"

The Clueless disdainfully ignore the reams of fine print, and proudly check: *death*.

After trying, and failing to understand the fine print, the Losers cautiously check: *booga booga*.

Finally, the Sociopath frowns doubtfully at the form, and asks: "Can I speak with your supervisor?"

5.1 Heads I Win, Tails You Lose

"[There is] a basic human instinct: the heads-I-win-tails-you-lose or HIWTYL (let's pronounce that "hightail") instinct. It is the tendency to grab more than your fair share of the rewards of success, and less than your fair share of the blame for failure."

occasional HIWTYL improvisations are far too unpredictable and unsystematic for Sociopath tastes. For them, HIWTYL is not about hacking reward/penalty structures after the fact. It is about proactively engineering systems and processes that *reliably, predictably* and *stealthily* generate HIWTYL outcomes. In other words, they look for ways to *systematically* claim paternity for successes, and orphan failures.

5.2 The Golden Ticket Reconsidered

To understand how Sociopaths handle HIWTYL engineering, consider the Golden Ticket example. It was a random idea that initially seemed good, then seemed to prove out bad, and then unexpectedly ended up as a win. Such are the uncertainties of life.

How would you attempt to bank such a success in predictable ways?

First you would cut a deal for a performance-linked bonus for a successful marketing campaign (but no penalty for failure of course).

Next, you would set up a *committee* and charter it to collect, vet and recommend ideas, perhaps with a promise of some nominal rewards, such as gift certificates, for successful ideas.

You would then drop hints and suggestions to create ideas, like the Golden Ticket scheme, that you personally favor.

And finally you would create the appropriate level of urgency in the work of the committee to achieve the risk-levels you want in the ideas produced.

If it works, you praise everybody generously, hand out a few gift certificates, keep your bonus to yourself, and move on. If it fails, you blame the people in charge of the work for failing to consider an “obvious” (with 20/20 hindsight) issue. The chair of such a committee would likely be Clueless, his appointment being a false honor a case of being set up take a fall.

If the effort fails, the blame would be neatly divided three ways:

The nominally accountable Clueless chair would be charged with incompetence.

The Losers would be blamed for poor *esprit de corps* “we need to improve employee engagement around here” (a case of blaming *Gemeinschaft*).

The committee as a whole would be charged with using bad systems and work processes for getting the work done (a case of blaming *Gesellschaft*). The last is often followed up with a mitigating rationalization, “well, at least we learned something, and can improve our processes next time.”

This sort of three-way distribution of blame is designed to discount the full magnitude of all-around culpability. The sum of the three kinds of blame assigned is not equal to the whole.

This simple example leads to a few interesting questions.

- *How* does this sort of thing operate at larger scales and longer time-horizons?
- *What* happens to the deficit, the portion of blame not assigned to anyone?
- *Why* do we want to fudge the books at all? Why not try to account for all the credit or blame as fairly as possible?

5.3 The Hanlon Dodge

The basic mechanism by which Sociopaths transfer blame to the Clueless, while reducing the overall severity of the penalty, is an application of Hanlon’s Razor: *never attribute to malice what can be adequately explained by stupidity*.

Because Hanlon’s Razor is often true, it is a believable dodge even when it is not. Coupled with another uniquely human trait, the tendency to link penalties to intentions rather than consequences (eg. first-degree murder vs. vehicular manslaughter), Hanlon’s razor can be used to manufacture predictable HIWTYL outcomes out of fundamentally unpredictable situations.

How? By shifting blame from a locus where it would be attributed to malice, to one where it can plausibly be attributed to incompetence, *the severity of penalties incurred is lowered*.

Hanlon’s razor is double-edged, and Sociopaths use it to feign incompetence themselves *or* to charge others with incompetence, as necessary.

When ends are defensible, but means are not, Sociopaths feign incompetence, and you get the first kind of *Hanlon Dodge*.

“When means are defensible, but ends are not, Sociopaths engineer *execution failures* via indirection and abstraction in the requests they make, thereby achieving their ends via “lucky accidents.” This is the second kind of Hanlon Dodge.”

An example in *The Office* is when David Wallace uses Michael as a cat's paw in the Prince Family Paper episode. The manner in which Wallace makes his request in their phone conversation is instructive

[...]

On the surface, this is a routine request to do some above-board competitive analysis. But by dangling the carrot of a better job and carefully refraining from specifying *how* the end is to be achieved (using abstractions like “fact-finding” and “fieldwork”), Wallace knows he can get Michael to do what he *really* wants done: industrial espionage. He engineers execution of his *real* intention (obtaining an unfair and illegal advantage over Prince Paper) using a predictable “failure” pattern in the execution of his *declared* intention (honest competition). He knows Michael can be relied on to try foul means, while letting him pretend that he only expected fair means to be used.

This is delegation with a built-in insurance policy. If the plan succeeds (as it does), Wallace can do exactly what he wants: drive Prince Paper out of business. If it had failed, and the industrial espionage had come to light, Michael and Dwight would have been held responsible for incompetent and overzealous execution, and a petty criminal act. Had Wallace been more explicit, he would be vulnerable to the more serious charge of orchestrating systematic anti-competitive practices.

As a bonus, Wallace keeps his hands clean for potential future interactions with Prince Paper (such as a White Knight buyout or grabbing newly unemployed talent at fire-sale prices). As the bloodied instrument, Michael has fewer chances of future positive interactions with the Prince Paper folks. In a later episode, when he is looking for a job, we see that his list of prospects has Prince Paper on it. When he calls, he gets an out-of-business message. Even if David Wallace hadn't driven them out of business, Michael could not have landed a job there, after what he visibly did to them. Sadly for Michael, the world is small and life is long.

In summary, seasoned Sociopaths maintain a permanent facade of strategic incompetence and ignorance in key areas, rather than just making up situational incompetence arguments. This is coupled with indirection and abstraction in things asked of reports. The result is HIWTYL judo.

How do we know this is not just a case of giving reports autonomy and discretion in how to act? Simple: when you *genuinely* want to give reports responsibilities that help them grow, you give them autonomy where they are strong. When you want to use them in engineered “failures” that give you the outcomes you want, you give them autonomy in areas where they are weak. If they can be relied upon to break laws, turn to violence, exhibit useful overzealousness or cut corners, those are the areas where you allow them discretion.

Together, these two behaviors allow Sociopaths to exploit the full potential of Hanlon's Razor. On the one hand, they can avoid doing unpleasant things themselves. On the other hand, they can achieve indefensible private intentions while maintaining plausible deniability.

5.4 Divide and Conquer

“Losers are far too smart to fall for Hanlon Dodge maneuvers as individuals. You need to work them in groups to get them behaving in sufficiently stupid ways. You also need to hook their own HIWTYL instincts, introducing a certain degree of complicity”

When you work *Gemeinschaft* the matrix of personal connections and trust relationships that binds Loser groups together there is really only one basic tactic: divide-and-conquer.

The key to successful divide-and-conquer moves lies in recognizing and exploiting two features of Loser groups.

The first is the presence of many active fault-lines.

Within the group, such dynamics merely reinforce status illegibility, as we saw last time. There is a never-ending sequence of little skirmishes within sub-groups, where people gain or lose status in specific situations. These situations usually involve a sub-quorum audience, which contributes to the status illegibility (since absent members of the group will not update their status assessments accurately).

Without external interference, these skirmishes work to keep the group at the edge of stability. They fault lines remain in a fluid state, widening and narrowing as the group saga evolves. Attractive and repulsive forces balance to keep the group at a marginally stable level of intimacy.

Until Sociopaths step in to exploit the precarious equilibrium.

Loser group dynamics offer a natural exploit: almost anyone can be made to ally with, or turn against, anybody else, with no need to manufacture reasons. Almost any sub-group can be played off against any other sub-group, since there are no absolute loyalties. The presence of myriad fault-lines within a Loser group presents a canvas for divide-and-conquer artistry.

A more realistic example is the sales-vs.-the-rest episode.

In this case, the Sociopaths spark a behavior change using a new incentive structure for the salespeople. The purpose is not merely to drive motivation at the *individual* level, but to drive collusion and schisms at the group level (*any* incentive preferentially offered to one sub-group will do this).

The incentive scheme itself is a HIWTYL mechanism from the point of view of the Sociopaths. If the salespeople had virtuously come together in solidarity with the support staff and shared their increased commissions as they'd originally planned, the Sociopaths would have still gotten improved performance overall at bargain prices, compared to costlier all-around incentives.

Of course, Losers being themselves susceptible to HIWTYLing, the Sociopaths could have confidently predicted what actually happened: collusion within the sales subgroup to screw over the support subgroup, with a nascent fault-line hardening into a true schism.

In this case, the schism could have been further exploited for benefits beyond the nominal aims of the incentive. The support subgroup could have been laid off and their jobs outsourced for example (after a preliminary re-org and possibly a relocation, to widen and formalize the new schism).

The second key feature of Loser groups is that they *naturally* apportion credit for successes and failures in ways that don't balance the books. To work the Clueless, you need a Hanlon Dodge to get to reduced charges. With the Losers, something similar happens naturally.

Here's why: Losers will accept blame, but *only* in inverse proportion to their self-perceived status. Due to the murkiness of collective responsibility, and the effect of status illegibility, self-perceived status is the only available basis for dividing up credit or blame. If everybody believes they are above average (with everybody else supporting that delusion, as we saw last time), they will assign more of the blame to others and less to themselves, and convince themselves that their partitioning of blame is fair.

If each person's culpability for a failure is taken at their own valuation, you will have a net deficit in the total accounted-for blame. Conversely, with a success, the sum of self-perceived credit attributions is *greater* than the credit actually available to go around. Loser group successes are effectively inflated, and blame discounted.

So as Loser groups accumulate a history, internal valuations of earned credit are steadily inflated, and assessments of culpability run a deficit. A successful group systematically overvalues its capabilities and develops a blindness to its weaknesses.

In the abstract, divide-and-conquer tactics are about forcing a real-world valuation event, during which such real deficits and fictitious surpluses are exposed, and paid for with lost social capital: schisms. The engineered schisms *increase* status legibility along the fault-line, and the group breaks apart, with the pieces regaining stability through illegibility. In the sales-vs.-the-rest case, the real-money skirmish reveals to both sides that the salespeople have higher status.

Such social capital destruction is always much easier than social capital creation (though not portrayed in *The Office*, this is usually done by subjecting a group to a forged-by-shared-combat[?] experience).

In summary, Sociopaths use unbalanced incentives to harden a fault-line into a schism, relying on natural intra-group tensions and fuzzy accounting to do the job.

Take note of a couple of aspects of Loser psychology as revealed by their behavior under such manipulation.

Losers have a *genuine* sense of honor. They want to accept fair blame for failures and fair credit for successes. Their HIWTYL instincts are buried under a layer of denial. Rather than make unfair claims directly, they make their unfair claims via deluded assessments of their own in-group status.

They also have significant empathy for each other, and a natural solidarity, so they don't like to pull naked HIWTYL maneuvers on others. When they do pull such maneuvers, they prefer to victimize faceless groups or institutions rather than individuals. When they do victimize individuals, they try to dehumanize their victims first (simultaneously lowering the victim's status to balance the books, and reducing their own empathy so they don't feel bad). Often, this is achieved through anger and contempt, allowing a "s/he deserves it" rationalization.

It's a case of dogs giving each other bad names, and hanging themselves.

5.5 The Gilded Cage

The last category of blame management is blame apportioned to the formal and institutionalized relationships within a community, *Gesellschaft*.

At the center of the *Gesellschaft* drama is the institution itself, with its organization charts, line and staff hierarchies, defined systems and processes, appeal mechanisms, formal roles and responsibilities, and formal statements of accountability.

In other words, we're talking paperwork.

One type of paperwork in particular: *forms*.

You've probably heard a piece of cynical wisdom: the purpose of a form is not to serve the person who submits it, but to protect the person who processes it.

Beneath that piece of wisdom is a whole can of worms.

Why, in our era of soft, empathetic, positive-psychology management-by-objectives, do we still have people like Holly, bound by rigid rules? What happened to employee empowerment? How are such direct "orders" successfully issued without inciting rebellion and mutiny?

In the disembodied voice of Kendall, we've encountered the shadowy background part of the organization: the staff hierarchy. Otherwise known as the bureaucracy.

5.6 Bureaucracy

The risk-management work of an organization can be divided into two parts: the unpredictable part that is the responsibility of the line hierarchy, and the predictable, repetitive part that is the responsibility of the staff hierarchy.

The predictability allows Sociopaths to automate much of the HIWTYL risk-management they need. Instead of having to expend effort executing Hanlon Dodge maneuvers, putting on justification theaters or engineering divide-and-conquer situations, they *program* the organization to act in those ways by installing bureaucracy-ware.

Bureaucracies are structures designed to do certain things very efficiently and competently: those that are by default in the best interests of the Sociopaths.

They are also designed to do certain things incompetently: those expensive things that the organization is expected to do, but would cut into Sociopath profits if actually done right.

And finally, they are designed to obstruct, delay and generally kill things that might *hurt* the interests of the Sociopaths.

Sociopaths design the system this way because they are only interested in building an organization that lasts long enough to extract the *easy* value from whatever market opportunity motivated its formation. Expensive investments that will not pay off before the organization hits diminishing returns are not made (it is revealing that the longest-lived businesses are family-owned Sociopaths have an incentive to think long term if they intend to pass the business on to their progeny).

The bureaucracy achieves its autocratic moral authority via an abstraction called the *rule of law*. Its emergent personality is Clueless by design. It is *designed* to fail in ways that achieve unspoken Sociopath intentions, while allowing them to claim the nobler explicit intentions enshrined in the law.

But this only works if the members of the hierarchy actually play along. If they display any sign of autonomy, a precedent is set: human discretion can over-ride the rule of law. This puts the human stewards *above* the law, and makes them culpable when their decisions go wrong. "I was just doing my job" or "I don't make the rules" is not a defense if you have a history of deciding what your job actually is, and selectively breaking or bending rules.

So what happens when the rules dictate clearly inappropriate responses to specific situations?

The on-paper solution is the right to appeal decisions or trigger exceptions. This solution is designed to work in exactly one case, and fail in all others. The cases that get through in a timely manner are those that would benefit the Sociopaths. For those that don't, the specific case is generally killed by the delay inherent in a converging appeals bottleneck. *Future* instances are handled by adding complicated exception clauses to the laws in the "designed to fail" ways we saw before. As a friend once remarked, tax law is complex for a reason: its primary purpose is to catalyze the growth of complicated exception-handling on top of an apparently simple percentage calculation.

As an added benefit, this means that over time, the "law" gets increasingly burdened with byzantine complexity. It becomes progressively more error-prone and arbitrary. As it grows, the scheme evolves beyond the comprehension of even the individuals within it, making it progressively easier to get the members to play along. An enlightened bureaucrat might conceivably challenge a relatively simple form and attempt to exercise cautious amounts of discretion. A bureaucrat in charge of a truly byzantine process will likely be too confused and intimidated to

challenge it (especially in modern IT-enabled bureaucracies, that are *literally* automated decision-rules systems run on computers, with only a few bewildered humans babysitting the beast).

There are only three ways to get a bureaucracy to do anything it wasn't designed to do: by stealth, with secret and deniable support from allies in the staff hierarchy; by getting air-cover from a sufficiently high-up Sociopath who can play poker with whichever oversubscribed Sociopath is in charge of exception-handling for the specific process (i.e., jumping the appeals queue and calling in favors to ensure the required ruling); and through corruption and bribery.

Returning to our overall theme of HIWTYL blame management, how does this scheme of things mitigate blame and shift it to safer places?

You simply blame the Clueless-by-design "system." You shake your head at its irrationality and slowness. You marvel at how it actually grows more byzantine and complex as it ages. You go from blaming the insiders for malicious pettiness in a young bureaucracy, to blaming them for being dumb cogs in mature ones. You periodically attempt to "reform" it through means that only ensure it gets worse (adding complexity).

Controlling the beast are the staff Sociopaths at the top, who program it, the Clueless petty bureaucrats or priests in the middle, and the staff Losers at the bottom. Staff losers are even more checked out and disengaged than the line Losers, since their entire function is to serve in a non-productive, passive-aggressive role on the one hand, and a menial, procedural role in aid of Sociopath intentions on the other. It is not a role that attracts people looking for even a *little* meaning in life.

Overall though, the staff hierarchy is subservient to the line hierarchy. Staff Sociopaths are lazier than line Sociopaths they seek rents rather than the higher returns of active Sociopathy. Historically, this laziness was deliberately manufactured by line Sociopaths: emperors working through eunuchs, slave-soldiers, celibate priest-hoods, and other asexual and estranged-from-family types who could be relied on not to look out for their kin (historically, the biggest challenge to Sociopaths has been kinship loyalties in the relatively autonomous line organizations, so they have always sought to stamp it out in the staff organizations that they control more directly). The vaguely asexual and androgynous character of Gabe a staff enforcer for the CEO is not an accident.

5.7 The Burden of Organizational Sins

Putting the whole picture together, you have a story of risk-management with systematic HIWTYLing of the rewards and penalties earned. Blame is partitioned among the individual Clueless (via Hanlon Dodges), Loser Culture (*Gemeinschaft* via divide-and-conquer) and the designed-to-fail bureaucracy (*Gesellschaft*).

The degree of complicity in this state of affairs varies: the Sociopaths are highly complicit, but are able to deny almost all of the complicity, theirs is the best HIWTYL bargain.

The Losers are trapped into complicity in the process of divide-and-conquer moves, and are not in a position to completely deny their complicity, except to themselves. As we will see next time, they've been hustled in this specific way for a reason.

The Clueless are the least complicit in terms of actual intentions, and are put within systems that are designed to protect them using their own cluelessness. They do try their own HIWTYL behaviors, but generally fail. Others need to do their HIWTYLing for them, for their own good.

While some get better HIWTYL deals than others, the blame management scheme overall is designed to be fundamentally leaky and non-zero-sum, with most of the blame draining away as unaccounted-for sins, turning into invisible organizational dark matter.

But there are visible signs of this accumulating dark matter:

1. Gradually decreasing morale (Loser social capital) as divide-and-conquer moves accumulate
2. The incompetence of the Clueless being gradually reinforced, making them decline rather than grow as human beings
3. The organization itself gradually turning into an incomprehensible, byzantine and increasingly error-prone maze, as it pretends to evolve and self-correct.
4. Systems and processes clogged with delayed exceptions, awaiting the attention of the Sociopaths at the top, who handle them with one eye on the residual value remaining to be harvested, trading expedited favorable decisions with other Sociopaths who need their exceptions to jump the queue.

While the value being realized is in an increasing-returns phase, the Sociopaths conscientiously handle exceptions to make the extraction more efficient. As the value declines, they gradually start cashing out, let exceptions pile up, and allow the organization to die.

And so the organization starts to die for our sins. Invisible, unaccounted-for sins accumulating as dark matter somewhere.

6 Part 6: Children of an Absent God

6.1 Power from Emptiness

Raging at an absent god — one who does not talk back or otherwise provide proof of his presence — is the sign of a recurring liminal passage in the Sociopath life, marking the start of yet another Sisyphean effort to extract a sliver of meaning from existence.

For [David Wallace], “Suck it” is not just a cry of despair and defiance. It is also the name of the product that returns him to grace in the human world.

[...]

Rather appropriately, Wallace’s *Suck It!* is a vacuum cleaner. [...] An amoral device that generates power from emptiness.

That is what Sociopaths ultimately do with their lives if they survive long enough: generate amoral power from increasing inner emptiness, transforming themselves into forces of nature.

As a side-effect, they also manufacture transient meanings to fuel the theaters of religiosity (including various secular religions) that lend meaning to lives of Losers and the Clueless. This meaning is achieved via subtraction, through withdrawal of complexities that the latter are predisposed to ignore, leaving behind simpler, more satisfying and more *tractable* realities for them to inhabit.

When Sociopath stories end, the Loser and Clueless stories that continue become bereft of meaning; sound and fury signifying nothing. When Sociopaths turn their attentions *en masse* to new frontiers, they leave behind complete cargo cults that continue to function for a while. *The Office* in its last season is such a world, with its major Sociopath stories complete, and its borderline Sociopaths, Jim and Darryl, busy flirting with the full-blown kind in Philadelphia. The show never really jumped the shark during its nine-year run (though it came close with the PB&J wedding). The Sociopaths merely left the building.

6.2 The Quest for Unmediated Realities

The Sociopath journey begins with what is essentially a *religious* dissatisfaction. A dissatisfaction that awakens the first time Sociopaths contemplate their situation in life.

On the one hand, they find the contemporary account of reality to be suspiciously *convenient* for those with power: it explains the prevailing social order as a *necessary* and *natural* one a little too neatly.

On the other hand, they find themselves facing the intolerable expectation that they accept powerless stations, defined by scripted actions and fixed rewards within that order.

Whether they dismiss prevailing accounts as rationalizations and begin a search for deeper meanings, or defy expectations and reach for power beyond their station, Sociopaths begin their unscripted journeys to rid themselves of that fundamental dissatisfaction; the sense that reality is more complex than whatever is being presented to them. That important things are being hidden from view, and not for their own good.

They are not entirely sure what they are looking for, but they do know that they are looking to engage reality directly, without mediation by other humans. To turn the famous line from *A Few Good Men* around, they are looking for the *truth* about social realities because they think they can handle it.

The Sociopath’s journey, mythologized to serve the religious needs of the Clueless, is what gives us the Hero’s Journey. Mythologized in a different way to serve Loser religiosity, the Sociopath becomes the priestly agent of larger intangible forces, offering absolution for sins and unpredictable signs of grace.

To the Sociopath, the very same journey, lived from the inside, is a nihilistic journey into emptiness, a gradual abandonment of the possibility of ultimate meanings.

The first sort of possible meaning to be abandoned is *moral* meaning.

6.3 Finding Amorality

Amorality is merely the first step. As the journey proceeds, Sociopaths progressively rip away layer after layer of social reality. The Sociopath’s journey can be understood as progressive unmasking of a sequence of increasingly ancient and fearsome gods, each reigning over a harsher social order, governing fewer humans. If morality falls by the wayside when the first layer is ripped away, other reassuring certainties, such as the idea of a benevolent universe, and predictable relationships between efforts and rewards, fall away in deeper layers.

With each new layer decoded, Sociopaths find transient meaning, but not enduring satisfaction.

Much to their surprise, however, they find that in the unsatisfying meanings they uncover, lie the keys to power over others. In seeking to penetrate mediated experiences of reality, they unexpectedly find themselves mediating those very realities for others. They acquire *agency* in the broadest sense of the word. Losers and the Clueless delegate to them not mere specialist matters like heart surgery or car repair, but control over the *meanings* of their very lives.

So in seeking to unmask the gods, they find themselves turning into the gods.

When they speak, they find that their words become imbued with divine authority. When they are spoken to, they hear prayerful tones of awe. The Clueless want to be them, Losers want to defer to them.

6.4 Gods Who Talk Back

“Small minds discuss people, average minds discuss events. Great minds discuss ideas.” – Eleanor Roosevelt

The divide between theism and atheism is a divide for small and average minds. Whether or not you mythologize your metaphysics by adding gods and divine events is ultimately irrelevant.

The important distinction, for the great mind of the Sociopath, is *whether or not the god talks back*. This is why we began this series, four years ago, by characterizing Sociopaths with an interchangeable pair of adjectives: Darwinist/Protestant Ethic. One is nominally an atheist perspective, while the other is a theist perspective. But in neither perspective does the divine talk back.

William James was the first to really get why [it has always been rare to accept consciously that the gods do not talk back when we address them]:

“Religion, therefore, as I now ask you arbitrarily to take it, shall mean for us the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.”

Anchored as they are in thoughts about social realities people and events the religions of Losers and the Clueless are ultimately religions of happiness.

[...]

This inability to experience being alone is what James called the *religion of healthy-mindedness* [...].

The gods of the Sociopaths, by contrast, are absent meanings and voices. Theirs is a true aloneness.

When Sociopaths accept the divine roles that the Clueless and Losers eagerly thrust upon them, they find themselves ruling the realities of others. But any human stand-in for an omnipotent conception of divinity must ultimately betray the believer.

The key, when betraying the Clueless, is to get them to blame themselves. With Losers, the key is to get them to blame each other. Each pattern of blame redirection gives us a particular theater of religiosity, and specific role for the Sociopath within it. Each also rewards the Sociopath with a specific kind of agency.

6.5 The Rankable Hero-God

“Small minds discuss people. In Jamesian solitude, the minds of the Clueless turn to contemplation of their idols.”

“The gods of the Clueless are idealized organizations and unreconstructed idols.”

The Clueless seek idols to emulate. Their gods are heroes they want to be like, and whose lives and stories they contemplate in private. The rules of the Clueless heavens are not fundamentally different from the rules of Clueless Earth.

It is not just the gods who are finite and countable in number, *everything* in Clueless religion is legible. Nothing is intangible. Sins are countable as points docked. Rewards and punishments are also countable.

Serving as high-ranking heroic god in this legible religion is easy. So long as Sociopaths stay sufficiently distant, and hide the elevator they took to heaven, their status is secure. They are perceived as being too high up to directly compete with. Even failures do not tarnish their divine images. When gods fail, they merely drop a few rungs, shuffling heavenly rankings.

It is a fundamentally innocent, child-like religiosity. And as we saw last time, the programmed organization exists primarily to protect this innocence, for use in sacrificial betrayals, when failures are blamed on their incompetence.

Moments of Sociopath betrayal, for the Clueless, are also their rare moments of unscripted autonomy. But mostly, they do not take advantage of such moments. Instead, they react with either a misguided sense of honor and loyalty, accepting punishment for incompetence, or ineffectually attempt to dodge blame.

In rare cases, the reaction to betrayal is a loss of innocence, an event that the Sociopath cannot entirely control. If the Sociopath is lucky, the betrayed Clueless will catch an unmediated glimpse of illegible realities, successfully process the terror, get beyond revenge motives, and turn into into an amoral new Sociopath. A potential ally or competitor, but always a welcome source of new energy and scarce companionship in the Sociopath world. This is *very* rare. Direct Clueless-to-Sociopath transitions, without time spent in Loserdom, is unlikely.

If the Sociopath is less lucky, blame for betrayal will be directed at an existing *group* of Losers, where it will diffuse harmlessly as general resentment and disappointment that cannot be processed within Clueless frames. This outcome might lead to the Clueless graduating to Loserdom themselves, where they turn into less useful, checked-out pawns.

The latter outcome can be engineered, as we saw last time in our Golden Ticket counterfactual example, but not very reliably. The former cannot be engineered at all. Enlightenment can always be encouraged, but never scripted.

6.6 Wrangling Loser Spirituality

“Small minds discuss people, average minds discuss events. In Jamesian solitude, the minds of Losers turn to endlessly reliving social events and the associated churn of status and emotions.”

The *external* consequence of such private processing of intangibles is *emotional resolution* that heals or creates rifts.

The *internal* consequence of such private processing is that Losers see themselves as *spiritual, not religious*.

Their “spirituality” manifests as a yearning to be *indivisibly* part of something bigger than themselves. They satisfy this yearning by looking for pools of positive collective emotions into which to dissolve their sense of self. So their heaven is not a pantheon of heroes, reachable via a long ladder of achievement. Instead, it is an abstraction derived from emotional experiences shared with others. Atheist Losers call it *belongingness*. Theist Losers might describe it as *oneness with the divine*

Loser resolution-seeking works by balancing illegible emotional experiences against each other, in a process of null-seeking. So the anger caused by an act of betrayal might be soothed by a symbolic act of contrition that restores emotional balance to the moral universe, and perceived relative status.

But by their very nature, emotions overweight social behavior over material substance. Having a \$100 bill thrown contemptuously at you hurts. Being politely handed \$10 feels good. The Loser mind, predictably, sees the first act as a slight and seeks *revenge*, and the second act as nice and seeks to repay it.

We saw an example from the *The Office* last time. In the sales-commissions episode we find that for the support staff, sharing in the salespeople’s commissions and being thrown a thank-you party are emotionally equivalent. Both heal the emotional rift, but one leaves the salespeople vastly better off.

6.7 The Sociopath as Priest

It is this strangely *incomplete* calculus that creates the shifting Loser world of rifts and alliances. By operating with a more complete calculus, Sociopaths are able to manipulate this world through the divide-and-conquer mechanisms. The result is that the Losers end up blaming each other for their losses, seek collective emotional resolution, and fail to adequately address the balance sheet of material rewards and losses.

To succeed, this strategy requires that Losers not look too closely at the non-emotional books. This is why, as we saw last time, divide-and-conquer is the most effective means for dealing with them, since it naturally creates emotional drama that keeps them busy while they are being manipulated.

Sociopaths encourage this mode of processing by framing their own contributions to betrayal situations as *necessary* and *inevitable*. They also carefully *avoid* contributing to the emotional texture of unfolding events, otherwise their roles might come under scrutiny by being included in the emotional computations.

For theatrically skilled Sociopaths, other non-vanilla affects are possible. “Divine anger” (Jan), “charming but firm elder” (Jo Bennett) and “unpredictable demigod” (Robert California) are examples. These framing affects are designed to shape outcomes without direct participation, in ways that cannot be achieved by neutral low-reactor affects.

These non-vanilla personalities operate by adding to, or subtracting from, the net emotional energy available to go around in Loser emotional calculations, but without intimate involvement. Sociopaths basically create the emotional boundary conditions of Loser life in simple or complex ways, depending on their skill level.

In the theater of Loser spirituality, the Sociopath must add *only* inevitable-seeming events that have material consequences, and non-participatory emotional boundary conditions.

So to the Loser, the Sociopath effectively presents a priestly mode of divine but constrained agency, accompanied by non-involved emotional power. This puts them in the position of being able to grant absolution to Losers for their sins.

Here's how this happens. Whatever emotions Losers cannot resolve among themselves remains as unprocessed, private *negative* emotions. These they are naturally inclined to view as sinful, since their god is shared *positive* emotions. Looking around, in the Sociopaths, they find trusted sources of non-involved, healing emotional capital.

And so with every divide-and-conquer betrayal, instead of *blaming* the Sociopaths who govern the social order, they look to them for absolution and emotional healing. Guilt is the one emotion that Losers cannot always resolve for themselves, since it sometimes requires quantities of forgiveness that mere humans cannot dispense, but priests can, as reserve bankers of the fiat currencies of Loser emotional life.

But as with betrayals of the Clueless, the moment of betrayal presents unscripted danger for the Sociopath. This is especially likely if the Sociopath demonstrates a failing that breaks the priestly character.

Losers are usually collectively, rather than singly betrayed, but Sociopaths are created one at a time. The danger is that some individual Loser *just* might catch an unmediated glimpse of reality during a divide-and-conquer move, assign blame correctly, and turn into a competing Sociopath, instead of seeking absolution.

Unlike Clueless loss of innocence, which is an awakening to the illegible side of the social order, Loser disillusionment is a loss of faith in shared emotional experience as the central social reality of life (in other words, they awaken to the thought that love is *not* what makes the world go around, and is *not* all you need).

The newly minted Sociopath might even acquire agency over the group's desire for collective action, and achieve enlightenment and power at the same time. But as with Clueless enlightenment, this is often a welcome development for Sociopaths, despite the immediate competitive threat. New free energy is always welcome. A mob cannot be reasoned with. A union with a Sociopath leader can.

And as with the Clueless, enlightenment can be encouraged but not scripted.

6.8 Meaning and Power through Withdrawal

Small minds discuss people, average minds discuss events, great minds discuss ideas. And in Jamesian solitude, Sociopaths find ideas contending in their minds. The creative destruction they script in the world of Losers and Clueless is mirrored by a creative destruction in their minds.

This process creates power, but destroys meaning, especially the meanings of social realities. The result is increasing inner emptiness and external power.

It is this very emptiness that allows the Sociopath to play hero for the Clueless and priest for Losers. Recall that Sociopaths create meaning for others through the things they subtract, rather than the things they add. This is something conspiracy theorists typically don't get: manufacturing fake realities is very hard. But subtractive simplification of reality is much easier, and yields just as much power.

From the persona they present to the Clueless, they subtract human fallibility and imperfection, presenting an illusory ideal of heroic perfection for the Clueless to identify with, and hopelessly strive toward.

From the persona they present to Losers, they subtract all participatory emotion, turning themselves into detached priests, bearing messages and gifts of emotional capital from hidden benevolent realities.

In each case, the Sociopath's role is marked by a withdrawal of information from the scene: information about their own personalities and inner lives, and information about specific situations and material realities.

It helps that the moral calculi of both the Clueless and Losers are incomplete, so they are primed to not notice what is being withdrawn.

The former cannot process anything that is not finite, countable and external. They can only process the *legible*.

The latter cannot process the material aspect of anything that involves strong emotions, or unresolved private negative emotions. Where the material cannot be separated from the emotional intense financial negotiations are a prime example they cannot process reality at all.

What the Clueless and Losers cannot process, the Sociopaths withdraw from the scene. What is left behind is more meaningful by virtue of being simpler than unmediated, uncensored reality. From the Loser and Clueless points of view, Sociopaths are merely removing noise that they don't know how to deal with anyway.

The Clueless can process the legible, so a legible world is presented to them.

Losers can process a world where emotional significance is the only kind of significance, so a world pregnant with emotional significance is created for them.

Which means that the power of Sociopaths derives from the things they remove from the scene: illegible, emotionally charged material realities that are potentially infinite in their complexity.

In other words, the raw material of power.

Over these withdrawn realities, Sociopaths exercise *agency* on behalf of others. They do not grab power. Power is simply ceded to them.

6.9 Power Literacy

This process of carving out, via subtraction, finite and tractable realities for the Clueless and Losers to inhabit, can be repeated *ad infinitum*, creating layers of social realities for evolving Clueless and Losers to journey through. If the first layer is a morality theater run by the amoral, other theaters involve other comforting social realities. If this sounds like gamification, it's because it is.

It is possible to progress through these layers without discovering the Sociopath world at all. Losers and Clueless can discover and decode specific bits of social reality, like the idea of amorality. Such discoveries do not automatically turn them into Sociopaths.

Sociopathy is not about ripping off a specific mask from the face of social reality. It is about recognizing that there *are* no social realities. There are only masks. Social realities exist as a hierarchy of increasingly sophisticated and specialized fictions for those predisposed to believe that there is something *special* about the human condition, which sets our realities apart from the rest of the universe.

There is, to the Sociopath, only one reality governing everything from quarks to galaxies. Humans have no special place within it. Any idea predicated on the special status of the human — such as justice, fairness, equality, talent — is raw material for a theater of mediated realities that can be created via subtraction of conflicting evidence, polishing and masking.

Mask is an appropriate term for any social reality created through subtraction, because an appearance of human-like agency for non-human realities is what the inhabitants require. By humanizing the non-human universe, we make the human special.

All that is required is to control people who believe in fairness, is to remove any evidence suggesting that the world might fundamentally *not* be a fair place, and mask it appropriately with a justice principle such as an afterlife calculus, or a retirement fantasy.

So the process of ripping away masks of social reality and getting behind them ultimately turns into a routine skill for the Sociopath: game design. Once you do it a few times, it becomes second nature, a sort of basic *power literacy*. An understanding of the processes by which the fictions of social reality are constructed, and growing skill at wrangling those processes.

But the acquisition of this skill comes with a cost.

6.10 Reality Shock

When a layer of social reality is penetrated and turned into a means for manipulating the realities of others, it is automatically devalued. To create medals and ranking schemes for the benefit of the Clueless is to see them as mere baubles yourself. To turn status-seeking into a control mechanism is to devalue status.

To devalue something is to judge any meaning it carries as inconsequential. In terms of our metaphor of masks of gods, the moment you rip off a mask and wear it yourself, whatever that mask represents becomes worth much less. So the Sociopath's journey is fundamentally a nihilistic one.

The climactic moment in this journey is the point where skill at manipulating social realities becomes unconscious.

Suddenly, it becomes apparent that *all* social realities are based on fictional meanings created by denying some aspect of natural, undivided reality. Reality that does not revolve around the needs of humans.

The mask-ripping process itself becomes revealed as an act within the last theater of social reality, the one within which at least *manipulating* social realities seems to be a meaningful process in some meta-sense. Game design with good and evil behaviors.

Losing *this* illusion is a total-perspective-vortex moment for the Sociopath: he comes face-to-face with the oldest and most fearsome god of all: the *absent* God. In that moment, the Sociopath viscerally experiences the vast inner emptiness that results from the sudden dissolution of all social realities. There's just a pile of masks with

no face beneath. Just quarks and stuff (it is interesting that we have chosen to label the Higgs boson the “god” particle; our mask-seeking is truly desperate).

This is *reality shock*: the visceral experience of the fact that there is only one reality, with no special place for humans. [...]

This moment is *visceral*, not intellectual. It is again possible to get to a merely intellectual appreciation of the “this is all there is” raw physicality of the human condition. That is not the same thing.

[...]

Darwinism here is merely a motif for an experienced reality, not a description of it. It is a way for a Sociopath to explain his condition to others using the categories of our times. A thousand years ago, an awakened Sociopath might have used any of a hundred theological motifs for the same idea: the absence of god, the absence of deeper meanings beneath visible social realities.

This is why the term *absent god* is more appropriate than *atheism*. For Sociopath philosophies to be coherent, there is no need to postulate the non-existence of god (though that is the Occam’s razor choice). He merely needs to be divinely Otherwise Occupied and absent from our little universe.

The ultimate parent merely needs to be away. That’s enough for Sociopaths to play. This is why some of the greatest Sociopaths in history have actually been sincerely religious (Rockefeller for instance, was a committed Baptist).

The reality shock really is a shock for the Sociopath. [...]

To weather the shock is to first process the sheer terror of a viscerally absent god, and then suddenly awaken to the deep freedom the condition represents.

6.11 Free as in Speech, Free as in Lunch

Once the Sociopath overcomes reality shock and frames his life condition as one defined by an *absence* of ultimate parental authority, and the fictitious nature of *all* social realities, he experiences a great sense of unlimited possibilities and power.

“Daddy and Mommy are not here. Anything is possible, and I can get away with anything. I can make up any sort of bullshit and my younger siblings will buy it.”

The sense of freedom is one I like to describe as *free as speech, and as in lunch*.

Free as in speech describes the Sociopath’s complete creative freedom in scripting social realities for others. Cherished human values are merely his crayon box.

Free as in lunch describes the Sociopath’s complete freedom from accountability, in his exercise of the agency ceded to him by the Losers and Clueless, via their belief in the reality of social orders.

Non-Sociopaths dimly recognize the nature of the free Sociopath world through their own categories: “moral hazard” and “principal-agent problem.” They vaguely sense that the realities being presented to them are bullshit: things said by people who are not lying so much as *indifferent* to whether or not they are telling the truth. Sociopath freedom of speech is the freedom to bullshit: they are bullshit *artists* in the truest sense of the phrase.

What non-Sociopaths don’t recognize is that these aren’t just strange and unusual environmental conditions that can be found in small pockets at the tops of pyramids of power, such as Lance Armstrong’s racing team, within a social order that *otherwise* makes some sort of sense.

It is the *default* condition of the universe. The universe is a morally hazardous place. The small pockets of unusual environmental conditions are in fact the fictional realities non-Sociopaths inhabit. This figure-ground inversion of non-Sociopath world-views gives us the default perspective of the Sociopath.

Non-Sociopaths, as Jack Nicholson correctly argued, really cannot *handle* the truth. The truth of an absent god. The truth of social realities as canvases for fiction for those who choose to create them. The truth of values as crayons in the pockets of unsupervised Sociopaths. The truth of the non-centrality of humans in the larger scheme of things.

When these truths are recognized, internalized and turned into default ways of seeing the world, creative-destruction becomes merely the act of living free, not a divinely ordained imperative or a primal urge. Creative destruction is not a script, but the *absence* of scripts. The freedom of Sociopaths is the same as the freedom of non-human animals. Those who view it as base merely provide yet another opportunity for Sociopaths to create non-base fictions for them to inhabit.

Sociopath lives, lived under these conditions of freedom, are incomprehensible to non-Sociopaths. So they imagine hidden social realities governing the lives of Sociopaths, turning them into forces of nature.

That is the ultimate imaginative act for non-Sociopaths: filling the inaccessible world of Sociopaths with convenient *extrapolated* social realities. Fictions that they can use to explain free Sociopath lives to themselves as being caused by some mysterious, hidden social order.

So Sociopath hero-god-priests come to inhabit entire universes imagined for them. And from these universes, a peculiar sort of Sociopath sometimes descends. One who seems to play neither hero, nor detached priest. One who strives, but fails, to participate in the emotional realities of non-Sociopaths. One who seeks to protect the innocent and help the disillusioned rediscover faith.

6.12 The Birth of the Messiah

Of those who weather reality shock, most simply accept their life and their permanent estrangement from non-Sociopaths. They have ascended to freedoms they cannot explain to those who do not possess them. They are somewhere between contemptuous and mildly indulgent towards those who inhabit the realities they create. Indifference is the default middle-ground attitude.

In other words, most Sociopaths learn to creatively exercise and enjoy their freedoms.

Some freely emulate other Sociopaths. Others carve out more imaginative paths. Morality becomes a matter of expressing fundamental dispositions rather than respecting social values. Kindness or cruelty, freely expressed. Those who are amused by suffering use their powers to cause it. Those who enjoy watching happiness theaters, create them through detached benevolence.

But freedom can also be a scary condition. It offers no canned reasons to do one thing instead of another, or even do anything at all. It offers no fixed motivations. There is nobody to blame for failures, no meaningful external validation for success. If physics allows it, you can do it. The consequences mean whatever you decide they mean.

So for some, freedom becomes a burden rather than a source of power. Life without scripted purposes and roles, instead of being viewed as a canvas for creative expression, becomes intolerably meaningless. The visceral knowledge that every act is a free choice, for which one can only hold oneself accountable, with nowhere to direct blame and nowhere to seek solace or absolution, becomes something they yearn to un-know.

The dissolution of social realities leaves behind only the cryptic material universe that must be painstakingly decoded through that supremely nihilistic behavior, scientific inquiry. But without a social order within which to value and make sense of decoded realities, such inquiry comes to seem like a worthless endeavor. Is a dinosaur fossil more meaningful than the Higgs boson? It is a meaningless question.

Freedom gained becomes paradise lost: the paradise of finite realities, mediated meanings and a comforting social order.

And so some Sociopaths reject the freedom and attempt to rejoin humanity.

And fail.

What is known cannot now be un-known. There is no way to reverse the effects of the red pill of Sociopathy.

So instead, such Sociopaths turn into compassionate Messiahs, protecting the innocence of the Clueless, restoring the faith of Losers, using their Sociopath powers to guard the exits of paradise lest some unwittingly walk out. Unlike Sociopaths at peace with their freedom, who generally welcome enlightened new company, Messiahs send them home to paradise when they can.

They continue hopelessly to try and participate, especially in collective Loser emotion. But the experience is empty for them, knowing what they know. So despite themselves, they subtract emotional content rather than adding either positive or negative content. They become social black holes.

6.13 Certainty of Nothingness