

Dialogues

Godalming College Philosophy Paper

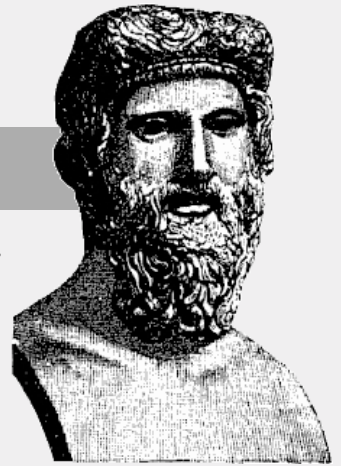


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I. The ethics of ‘Stacking the deck’: a moral examination on outsmarting casinos

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For as long as currency has existed, money and gambling, or at least a sort, have come hand in hand. There is evidence that gambling has existed since Ancient China, as seen in the ‘Book of Songs’ which records a game where players draw wooden tiles in what appears to be lottery tickets. Assuming the ‘tickets’ are paid for, which they likely are, we can very comfortably place the introduction of gambling to at least 2000 years before Christ. In Elizabethan times, organised betting was reserved mainly for higher society, such as in horse races, but over time, gambling has adapted into something highly commercialised and more commonplace than before. Anyone can now spend the day in a casino or even a fairground, a place marketed to children or younger teens, and gamble their money away in manufactured and deliberately skewed odds. Because of this I would argue that the concept of casinos and betting institutions is inherently morally grey. Thus, examining the history of gambling, the implications of gambling in the present and what it could become in the future due to the rise of Artificial Intelligence, is necessary to fully express my belief that bringing the odds back into your favour, even by at best questionable methods, is morally permissible in an environment designed to leave the player’s pockets empty and the institution’s wallets full.

Before I can begin to justify strategic card playing, I must first establish that casinos have mastered the art of making gambling as addictive as possible. One of the biggest hooks is the fact that most gamblers severely overestimate their chances of winning by being given ‘near misses’. These come with the illusion of a key part of the development of a gambling addiction – personal choice. This gives the gambler the idea that they have control over the outcome, believing that their own mistakes stand in the way of them winning the jackpot, and needing ‘just one more chance’ to win back the money they have already lost to a game ultimately based on chance. This is known as loss chasing, and, probably unsurprisingly, bears a large resemblance to drug addiction, and comes with cravings and withdrawal, just like any other addiction. This is because winning at gambling, because it is designed to be a very rare occurrence, causes a lot of dopamine to be released at once, giving the gambler a rush, and helping the addiction to develop. The result? A steady loss of money from the gambler, and a steady increase in profit for the casino.

Every part of a casino is purposefully crafted to keep people playing for as long as possible. Because there’s so much profit, casinos can afford to stay open long hours, sometimes offering free food and alcohol, which is served by very attractive women to appeal to men, who are generally the target demographic for these institutions due to the fact that the average man’s risk appetite is 55% higher than the average woman, and this discrepancy is increased in stressful situations as women generally take less risks when stressed whilst men do the opposite.¹ This strategic atmosphere even extends to the design of the building; many casinos don’t have any clocks on the walls and are completely windowless, which makes a casino a seemingly timeless environment. In a place with high stakes, higher reward, and breeding addiction, hours can seem like minutes, resulting in lack

¹Byrnes, J. P., Miller, D. C., & Schafer, W. D. (1999). Gender differences in risk taking: A meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 125(3), 367-383. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.125.3.367>

of clarity and an increase in risk taking behaviour. In other words, the ideal outcome for a betting house. Another calculated way of reducing odds is the introduction of 'high rollers', who are people who can afford to lose large sums of money at the tables. Casinos can afford to bring in the richest of the rich for a night of entertainment playing against the rest of the gamblers who have a lot more at stake, which significantly increases both the pace of play and the price of losses due to normative social influence.

This is when a person adopts another person's behaviour due to wanting to be accepted by that person, and is known as identification, and would cause someone to want to seem able to match the money that a higher roller can put down. Furthermore, the increased bet sizes also increase the loss chasing that the gambler experiences; the winnings are visible and the gambler will very likely believe that with just a bit more skill, a bit more practice, all of their losses can be won back in one fell swoop. But what if it can?

For the purpose of comparison, I will assume that payouts from winning a gambling game are just like a prize from a sports competition. Many sports competitions, particularly in lower or children's leagues, there is a payment fee to enter which is part of how a monetary prize can be made, as well as funding the event etc. The prize, and of course the glory of winning, is a large motivator for the participants. This causes them to practice and train for their sport, and, most crucially, strategise. Without strategy, a sports team wouldn't have a hope of beating another well strategised team with evenly matched, or more, skill. It's vital for success, and requires advance planning and confidence in execution. Each player would develop their own strategy to ensure they have the best possible odds of success. But what's the differentiator between sport and gambling? Apart from the physical element (although some would argue that chess is also a sport) I'd say that there actually isn't much. The best gamblers are those who practice and perfect their own individual strategy, often involving counting cards and attempting to devise a system to calculate probabilities in their head. In both sport and gambling, there is an intense mental component which is the difference between success and failure. This is incredibly intellectually demanding, and actually, those who are best at this are deemed to be too risky to be regularly allowed to play in a casino. Does this mean that in a casino one is expected to blindly drop money? Gambling, just like sport, is a game, and requires both skill and wit. Surely, to develop skill, one must practice counting cards and calculating probability, and find the best method to do so.

But what is the difference between counting cards in one's head and using a clicker to essentially do the same thing, with the same outcome? Casinos would say that the switch from mental to physical means is the difference between legal play and cheating, but I'd argue that the line between the two is moderately blurred, in the sense that policing 'cheating' isn't completely black and white. I'd like you to decide, from this list of options, where the cheating starts: not bothering to count any cards; counting cards in your head; counting cards by tapping your leg under the table; using your fingers to help keep track of the cards; using a clicker to assist; using a phone, etc. I can safely assume that each reader has come to a different conclusion about where the cheating starts, which leads me to question; what makes cheating, cheating? In other words, what is the grain of sand? It is opinion based, and would be different for each person, and arguably if everyone cheated against each other, the cheating would effectively 'cancel out,' and would turn gambling into a game of skill, not a game of luck, and level the playing field between the institution and the player. This proves my standing that gambling has been specifically curated as a way to maximum profit and, as I have previously established, prey on the addiction and loss chasing of players.

Conversely, it is not a little-known fact that it is very difficult to beat the purposeful odds at a casino. A person going to a casino to try their luck would most likely be aware of the fact. Going to a casino is voluntary, as is the amount of money you bet. Just because casinos prey on addiction, the addiction is originally formed by the person's own choices leading up to it; this

is like a smoking addiction, which are not magically formed through chance, but are caused by consistent smoking over a long period of time. Whilst gambling addictions are formed faster, due to loss chasing in the hope of making a large monetary gain, they are still addictions which must be formed through consistent attendance to a casino. Because of the voluntary nature of playing in a casino, it could be argued that cheating is essentially stealing from the institution, and is no different from breaking into a safe where the casino's money is stored. Really, gaining the money in 'illegal ways' could actually be considered morally equivalent to stealing. The money that one gains from cheating was never theirs to steal in the first place and would therefore be morally wrong, illustrated through normative moral principles such as Kant's deontology, particularly through his first categorical imperative which is that an action is morally wrong if, after universalising the maxim (law), the maxim becomes a logical contradiction. If the maxim were to be 'always steal,' and everyone always stole, eventually this would result in no one having any property to steal in the first place, which is just one way of showing that stealing, and by extension cheating, is morally incorrect, even when stealing from what I'd argue is a corrupt institution. However, what if we were to assume the maxim is 'always steal from a corrupt institution?' After universalising this maxim, all that would happen is that corrupt institutions would have less money, which is actually a desirable result, or at the very least not a terrible outcome. Crucially, this maxim does not result in a logical contradiction, so stealing from a casino is actually not objectively morally incorrect. This leads me, again, to the conclusion that cheating, whatever cheating is defined as, is at worst morally grey, and at best almost a beneficial thing to the general public.

Because of the nature of gambling, and as a way to appeal to the masses, the development of society towards a more technology-based world has also caused casinos to move in the same direction. Today, there at least 175 different online casinos operating in the UK alone² as of 2022, which are all powered by human written code or, particularly now, artificial intelligence. The advancement of this software is in fact even more detrimental to the odds that gamblers face, as now we have no way of verifying one crucial fact; how do we know if the software isn't cheating? If we go back to the example of counting cards, it is necessary that the code for the software MUST count cards. Without this code, it is impossible for the robot to play against you. It doesn't count cards in the way that we may deem to be not cheating, such as counting in our mind, but rather count them in a very objective way, comparable to our 'card clicker.' A robot doesn't have a mind like a human does – its mind is just its code, and its actions are a direct result of the code. The robot, if we hold it to the same standards for cheating that we are held to, is an inherent cheat. This begs the question, what makes it wrong for a human to cheat against a robot who can do nothing but cheat? I'd say nothing at all, as, as I have previously established, two parties cheating against each other simply just cancels out the cheating.

On the other hand, gambling institutions must be well policed by law, and require a license to operate, both in casinos and remotely³. Because these institutions are legal, the profits that they make will certainly be taxed, causing the government to make money which is in fact beneficial to the population. Bringing back the example of smoking, this is the same reason cigarettes are still legal, even though they empirically show detrimental effects to both physical and mental health. Cheating, and stealing, from a casino would decrease the profit margins and cause less tax to be gleaned from the institution; whilst cheating causes individual gain, it could actually lead to a collective loss due to the lack of tax that the government would reinvest into the economy and benefit the general population. This demonstrates how whilst 'stealing' from a supposedly corrupt institution, whilst individually not being morally wrong, the repercussions of this would eventually lead to an overall detriment to society. Is this permissible? Is this selfish? This all depends on how much that percentage of tax that is brought by gambling is put back into society. In 2017, HM Revenue and Customs collected £2.9 billion in gambling related duty, with

² Xace. (2023, April 26). *Gambling Statistics UK 2022 | Gambling Company Stats*. [www.xace.io](https://www.xace.io/payments/gambling-statistics-uk-2022).

³ Gambling Act 2005, Part 5, Clause 89-90 (2005).

a large portion of this being collected from the 15% tax that gambling operators must pay from their profits⁴. However, this tax implies that the overall profits from gambling in 2017 alone is approximately £19.3 billion, which, considering inflation, is nearly £30 billion today. This is an astronomical amount of money, and if we assume that this money has been collected through exploiting not only probability, but the gamblers themselves. This money is something taken from the coercion of gambling to extract profit, and therefore, even while it provides a large amount of tax to benefit the public, could it be said that the suffering of the individuals outweighs the benefits of tax?⁵ This could be particularly true if tax isn't mainly used to benefit the general population, which, over the past years, is the case, due to the privatisation of public services such as healthcare, public transport and education. The cost of living has increased, while government subsidies have decreased. Furthermore, in 2023, the government spent £53.9 billion on defence, funding the military, weaponry and war.⁶ Whilst violence is an unfortunate truth of life, I believe that using taxpayers' money to fund this violence while simultaneously privatising basic needs such as healthcare and education outweighs the moral wrongness of maximising your own individual profits in a casino. Higher up members of government also live an opulent lifestyle, funded by tax money – the lack of extra tax collected through casinos wouldn't hugely affect the population if all it was doing was paying a politician's large bonus.

In conclusion, the morality of cheating within a gambling context cannot be assessed in isolation, but must be weighed against the systems it challenges. Casinos are institutions meticulously engineered to exploit human psychology, profit from addiction, and capitalise on manufactured odds, legally and with the guise of entertainment. If the playing field is so deliberately uneven, then any attempt to restore balance, even via means labelled as 'cheating', becomes not an act of dishonesty, but instead the most logical course of action. And while concerns about lost tax revenue and societal consequence are not without merit, we must consider how our own ethically ambiguous actions outweigh the deliberate harm caused by gambling institutions. The answer is not simple or universal, but this moral ambiguity underscores the complexity of gambling in the modern age. Cheating, then, may not be the moral crime we are led to believe but instead might just be the only way to beat a game that was never meant to be fair.

⁴ Niaz, A. (2022, March). *Gambling and Taxation in the United Kingdom*. TaxQube.co.uk.
<https://taxqube.co.uk/gambling-and-taxation-in-the-united-kingdom/>

⁵ Bentham, J. (1789). *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. Greenwood Press.

⁶ Mills, C., Hutton, G., Brooke-Holland, L., Foley, N., & Walker, N. (2025, May 28). *UK defence spending*. House of Commons Library. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8175&/>

2. *'God Is Dead' by Friedrich Nietzsche – Should Religion Cease to Exist?*

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Is Christianity a cult that does not teach what Jesus once wanted it to? “God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him,” Nietzsche writes.⁷ The famous line demands sudden attention, addressing the flaws in Christianity which consume every aspect of the religion. Nietzsche creates an almost hilarious atmosphere, as the only way to reject the discomfort of his slander is to laugh it off. It appears taboo for him to describe a Christian as “the most naïve and backward man of today” and yet as Nietzsche produces reason after reason for why this is, this opinion becomes uncomfortably plausible. Extremely controversial? Sure it is. But behind these insults is an interesting perspective on why religion needs critique.

Nietzsche explains that when people feel powerful, they doubt whether they can be the sole reason for this power as the feeling it creates is strange, so they reason that the power must be God’s presence. Likewise, this is why people credit God with having done something they have done themselves. In the late nineteenth century, there was a period of drastic church growth (revivalism) around Nietzsche’s time, which explains why he argued that society had become so focused on religion in a way that wasn’t serving them. He argues that in this way, “man diminished himself,” creating the threat of punishment and sin so that God appeared frightening. The fear of the consequences of an individual’s actions meant that all negative actions (sins) were blamed an individual’s self, and all good experiences were credited to God. The Church began to teach obedience more than love. This is not how God wanted it to be.

This book is a literary combination of two books: *The Will to Power* and *The Joyous Science*. It focuses purely on German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche’s view on religion and the existence of God, and his nihilistic perspective comes across vividly within it. There is a clear sense that he believes morality does not exist objectively, and religion is practically a farce. In most cases it is hard to disagree with a philosopher who has made every sub-topic in this collection of ideas so straightforward and engaging, covering such a range of issues within Christianity and Judaism. Nietzsche is that defiant loud-mouth that society still needs today. This makes opposing views on religion a timeless, relevant conversation. “The Christian determination to find the world ugly and bad has made the world ugly and bad,” is the most interesting view of the whole novel. It would be reasonable to argue that some of Nietzsche’s opinions aren’t fully expanded on, and as irritating as this is, it also creates an undeniable impact. This quote lies on its own, in its own section, with nothing more than the sub-heading: “Dangerous Determination.” It has some clarification if paired with a similar section which states that the most

⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche. (2021). *God is Dead. God Remains Dead. And We Have Killed Him*. Penguin Publishing Group. Note, all quotes in this essay are lifted from this book.

vulnerable people have become Christians, such as those without jobs or those who believe the end is near. It's a whole lot easier to believe in the afterlife than being a nihilist. These people crave stability and authority, and this is easily found in a church. Religion cannot recruit without people feeling the need to join, and there's no demand for faith without a feeling of peril looming, and a desire for salvation. He suggests that belief in God has caused many to change their mindsets so that they fear judgement day, consequently making the world appear to them "ugly and bad."

Nietzsche certainly does not believe in God, however he is able to recognise that religion in some instances can be beneficial, as he mentions the positive impact Buddhism has on people in comparison to Christianity and Judaism. This is because it doesn't possess hatred or disappointment, and instead highlights love and being able to leave things in the past. This suggests that some religions can help society, if they are able to focus more on positivity. Out of all 121 pages of this book, this is one of the only compliments he has given (ironically), and it is only included to diminish other religions. It paints them as unforgiving and too focused on what is sinful. Christianity fundamentally revolves around forgiveness, but he thinks it is 'unforgiving'. This is because Nietzsche believes "the Church is the barbarisation of Christianity," suggesting that modern-day Christian beliefs are hypocritical. It does not showcase what Jesus initially taught. The Church is much more focused on scorning others than it should be. "Love thy neighbour" has, in some ways, lost its meaning. Believers will eventually "embrace all the things that he originally rejected" such as discrimination and anger.

The philosopher shares some of his opinions on morality also, such as how it's selfish to push your own personal moral code onto others. This questions the fundamental nature of Christianity, rejecting the Ten Commandments and evangelism. For Nietzsche, morality is simply too subjective to be applied to everyone in the same manner, as every action is 'entirely unique' – so the order 'do not steal' should not result in punishment every time. Nietzsche's view here also suggests followers of Christianity should not share Jesus' teachings around what is right and what is sinful. To Nietzsche, this would make religion somewhat pointless, in a moral sense. He even goes so far as to say that "the time has come for us to turn away in disgust from all this nonsense of some standing in moral judgement over others!" Could he be referring to the necessity of rejecting God as an all-knowing judge?

The German philosopher has highlighted that religion will never be perfect, and many may follow it because it acted as a saviour to them, a way out of feeling vulnerable. That is why the arguments that Nietzsche makes are unapologetically challenging and form an insightful collection of doubtful truths.

3. From Plato to PayPal: The Philosophy of the American New Right.

“Move fast and break things”

-Facebook’s first motto

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Donald Trump may not have any discernible ideology or motivations other than Donald Trump Inc.,⁸ but the New Right movement he figureheads does. The political constellation loosely described as the New Right has, in the past two decades, emerged as one of the most striking challenges to the post–Cold War consensus around liberal democracy, market globalisation, and incremental social reform. It is not a movement defined by a single institution or party, but by a loose grouping of intellectual commitments that borrow selectively from earlier traditions of conservatism and libertarianism while departing from both in decisive ways. The New Right is more than a revival of Reaganite economics or Thatcherite cultural conservatism; it reflects a dissatisfaction with perceived (or genuine) institutional stagnation, cultural relativism, and the failure of democracy to deliver genuine progress.⁹ As such it constitutes not merely a continuation of the Old Right’s familiar scepticism of the state, but a more radical reimagining of a fundamentally new political order in an age shaped by technology, globalisation and social fragmentation.

If Donald Trump is the demagogical public mouthpiece of the New Right, Peter Thiel functions as its key intellectual figure and leader. Unlike Trump, whose appeal rests on populist charisma and disruption,¹⁰ Thiel provides the New Right with something closer to a philosophical core. A Stanford Philosophy graduate, billionaire entrepreneur and co-founder of PayPal, Palantir, and an early investor in Facebook, Thiel has leveraged both wealth and influence to shape the Right’s ideological trajectory in the twenty-first century.¹¹ His significance lies not only in his significant financial support for figures such as Donald Trump and J. D. Vance (in particular his \$15 million financing of Vance’s run for senate), but also in his articulation of an ideological framework that resonates with the New Right’s underlying currents.

⁸ Ganesh, Janan. 2025. *Trump and MAGA are no longer the same thing*. 16 July. Accessed September 2025. <https://www.ft.com/content/0871d78d-e407-4848-b67b-bea0fdf674bc#>.

⁹ Pogue, James. 2022. *Vanity Fair*. 22 June. Accessed September 2025. https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2022/04/inside-the-new-right-where-peter-thiel-is-placing-his-biggest-bets?srsltid=AfmBOoiEFL5_ms-nCr-5pXITu213Fvb_XAcRe1XYN1DRlafAfl9S1cN.

¹⁰ Oliver, J. Eric, and Wendy M. Rahn. 2016. “Rise of the ‘Trumpenvolk’: Populism in the 2016 Election.” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 189–206.

¹¹ Chafkin, Max. 2021. *The Contrarian: Peter Thiel and Silicon Valley’s Pursuit of Power*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing.

To have a New Right you must have an Old Right - post-war American conservatism. Historically, conservatism has been grounded in the defence of tradition, the preservation of inherited institutions, and an emphasis on gradual reform rather than rupture. From Edmund Burke onwards, conservatives have valued stability, hierarchy and cultural continuity, often treating change with suspicion. For example, William F. Buckley Jr. argued that societies must be guided by enduring traditions, religious authority and intellectual elites, to avoid succumbing to relativism and chaos.¹² By contrast, the libertarian tradition, especially in its twentieth-century American forms prioritised individual freedom, limited government and the unfettered operation of markets. Particularly via her philosophical novels, *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*, Ayn Rand depicted her view of the dangers of a bureaucratically overweight and turgid state in contrast to the strength of the individual, the heroic entrepreneur of the meritocratic American dream of self-betterment. Neoliberal Chicago school economists such as Friedrich von Hayek and Milton Friedmann gave an economic manifestation of a similar libertarian Randian entrepreneurial individualism; economic state intervention distorted the natural order of markets and undermined freedom.

The uneasy philosophical synthesis of these two currents of classical liberalism and religious traditionalism that the Old Right incorporated was first elaborated in the mid-twentieth century by Frank Meyer, a *National Review* senior editor.¹³ It defined much of the mainstream Right in the second half of the twentieth century, underpinning the politics and policy of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. Meyer argued that “Contemporary American conservatism has been a blending of two lines of thought ... one stream that emphasizes tradition on the one hand and virtue as the end of man’s existence on the other, and another stream that emphasizes the use of reason and the primacy of freedom as a necessary precondition of virtue.”¹⁴ This perhaps contradictory marriage can only be fully explained as a reaction to the growing secular and collectivist influences of communism. Classical liberalism and religious traditionalism both act as dipolar antonyms to the key aspects of communism.

Yet by the early twenty-first century, the fusionist settlement had begun to fray. The Soviet Union had fallen; the unifying threat of communism lost. Globalisation appeared to enrich elites while hollowing out the middle and working class. As a consequence of economic neoliberalism, income inequality in the U.S. increased by over 20% between 1980 and 2016, and middle and lower-class incomes stagnated.¹⁵ Liberal democracy seemed increasingly paralysed, and the technological utopianism once championed by both libertarians and progressives began to fuel anxieties about stagnation, inequality and social fragmentation. There was a sense that the governmental institutions that the Old Right and traditional conservatism had focused so much energy on sustaining (the ‘deep

¹² Buckley, F. William. 1951. *God and Man at Yale*. Regnery Publishing.

¹³ Slade, Stephanie. 2024. *Fusion*. Accessed September 2025. <https://fusionaier.org/2024/fusion-is-philosophy-not-party-politics/>.

¹⁴ Meyer, Frank. 1965. “Lincoln Without Rhetoric.” *The National Review*.

¹⁵ Horowitz, Menasce Ulinana, Ruth Igelnik, and Rakesh Kochhar. 2024. *Trends in income and wealth inequality*. Website, Pew Research. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/01/09/trends-in-income-and-wealth-inequality/#fn-39263-9>.

state') had failed and become complicit in the very issues they aimed to solve. The 2008 financial crisis caused by failures of unregulated business seemed to act as the nadir of neoliberalism – in the words of the French President Nicholas Sarkozy “lassie-faire is finished”¹⁶ – and the consequent vast state intervention led “the prospects for a libertarian politics appear grim indeed”.¹⁷ For traditional conservatives, this collapse was a crisis of legitimacy; for the proto-New-Right libertarians it led to radicalisation, acting as a catalyst which disproved that the old order was fit for purpose, due to the failure of the free markets requiring state intervention. If the Old Right still believed that liberal-democratic institutions could mediate between freedom and order, the New Right increasingly rejected any faith in them. They believed that the administrative state was increasingly captured by entrenched bureaucracies, that the liberal order served only transnational elites, and that democracy itself functioned as a machine of mediocrity. Which drove people such as Peter Thiel to seek alternatives outside the state altogether. In his *The Education of a Libertarian*, he announced: “I no longer believe that freedom and democracy are compatible” and proposed technology (e.g. the cyberspace or seasteading) as “a new space for freedom”, the greatest libertarian alternative to politics.¹⁸

This marks the key transformation: from an Old Right libertarianism of reform (shrink the state via reducing taxes; deregulate markets) to a New Right libertarianism of escape, a project to construct parallel orders where elites can innovate unencumbered by mass politics. It is in this context of disillusionment with neoliberalism’s promises and liberal democracy’s perceived failures that the deeper philosophical commitments of the New Right take on their full significance.

For Thiel and the New Right, technology and technological innovation provides a way out of the post-financial-crisis stagnation of the modern world. Innovation is not simply an economic activity but a political principle, the measure of a state’s vitality and legitimacy. Yet this emphasis on the transformative power of exceptional individuals resonates deeply with the Straussian and Platonic idea of a philosophical elite: those few who perceive the deeper truths of political life and, through guidance if not direct rule, shape society’s trajectory. For Thiel, democratic systems too often constrain innovation by redistributing wealth from entrepreneurial elites to the masses, echoing Plato’s fear that the appetites of the majority overpower the wisdom of the few. Plato critiques democracy in the *Republic*, arguing that democracy was not a stable or desirable regime but a transitional phase on the way to tyranny: a society where the aim of pursuing individual citizens private interests will become a society of tyrants competing for dominance. Those which are most skilled at manipulation and seizing power will control society, and the freest society will descend into tyranny and disorder.¹⁹ Plato states “*Unless ... political*

¹⁶ Thornhill, John. 2008. *Financial Times*. 25 September. Accessed September 2025.
<https://www.ft.com/content/58bc11e4-8b35-11dd-b634-0000779fd18c>.

¹⁷ Thiel, Peter. 2009. “The Education of a Libetarian.” *Cato Unbound*.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 17

¹⁹ Oxenburgh, Richard. 2015. “Philosopher-Kings In The Kingdom of Ends .” *Philosophy Now*

*power and philosophy coincide in the same place... there [will be] no rest from ills of the city... nor I think for humankind.”*²⁰ Hence a philosopher-king must be necessary for an optimal society.

From this position of having a great, wise, ruler of the state it does not seem difficult to translate Plato's particular definition of the ruler as a philosopher-king to the modern New Right idiom - faith in the individual, the CEO, innovators or entrepreneurs, figures whose entrepreneurial daring and monopoly-building mirror the philosopher's privileged access to higher truths. This convergence finds its most provocative expression in the writings of Curtis Yarvin, known by his online pseudonym Mencius Moldbug, who despite their initial obscurity has an outsize influence on the Trump administration, with JD Vance considering him a friend.²¹ His “neoreactionary” (NRx) “Dark Enlightenment” blogs and manifesto argue that democracy must be abandoned due to its inflexibility in favour of a corporate model of governance - a “CEO of America” empowered to act decisively, unencumbered by the inefficiencies of popular rule. Here, the Platonic, Nietzschean, and Straussian legacies crystallise into a distinctly twenty-first-century vision: a technocratic-entrepreneurial aristocracy, justified by its capacity to innovate, ruling with the same authority and efficiency as a private firm. Although Plato and neo-liberalism may seem oxymoronic, seeing as in the standard interpretation Plato argues against self-determination of the masses, the NRx movement and Peter Thiel attempt to use Leo Strauss's interpretation of Plato to reconcile Plato with liberalism.

Strauss's role is crucial in making this translation from Plato's philosopher-king to the New Right's techno-entrepreneur plausible, even if uneasy. For Strauss, Plato's critique of democracy was not merely an antiquarian curiosity but a timeless intuition of the instability of societies that value equality above excellence.²² By insisting that liberal democracy, if removed from the virtue of individuals, dissolves into relativism and nihilism, Strauss offered a language through which NRx and Peter Thiel could reframe Plato's hierarchical vision without appearing to abandon the liberal tradition altogether. His defence of esoteric teaching - philosophers writing in ways accessible only to the few - further legitimises the idea that elites may rightly conceal the full scope of their power or vision from the masses (demos), guiding society indirectly rather than through open deliberation.²³ It is this Straussian lens that allows Thiel and Yarvin to reconcile, however uneasily, Plato with a certain strand of liberalism: not liberalism as democracy and mass participation, but liberalism as the protection of a space in which exceptional individuals can act without constraint. What emerges is less a straightforward revival of Platonic rule than a Straussian transposition of Plato into Silicon Valley, where the monopolist technocratic CEO or dictator becomes the custodian of order precisely because only he can see beyond the relativism and stagnation of the democratic present. Although this seems mostly pragmatic and selective adaptation of Strauss and Plato's ideas with Randian entrepreneurial individualism. As, for Strauss, the philosopher is distinguished not by wealth, or power but by contemplative insight into natural right and the order of the good. Philosophers may guide politics,

²⁰ Plato. (1968). *The Republic of Plato* (A. Bloom, Trans.). New York Basic Books.

²¹ Ward, Ian. 2024. *The Seven Thinkers and Groups That Have Shaped JD Vance's Unusual Worldview*. 18 June. <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2024/07/18/jd-vance-world-view-sources-00168984>.

²² Smith, Steven B. 2000. “Leo Strauss's Platonic Liberalism.” *Political Theory*.

²³ Wallach, John R. 2001. “Smith, Strauss, and Platonic Liberalism.” *Political Theory*.

but they do so esoterically, indirectly, and outside the corrupting influence of power – informed by Plato’s disastrous results in Syracuse.²⁴ Both Rand and Strauss supply an anti-democratic vocabulary – the Straussian language of elitist rule and the Randian language of heroic self-determination – that can be repurposed to legitimise technocratic dictatorships. In Peter Thiel, this alliance is made real: a Straussian suspicion of democracy as corrosive of excellence is combined with a Randian faith in entrepreneurial audacity as the only path for progress. Although the tension is unresolved, as for Strauss, the philosopher must conceal his wisdom, wary of destabilising society, but for Rand, the entrepreneur’s greatness is overt and demands recognition. Consequently, the New Right stitches together two philosophically incompatible but strategically useful visions, producing an ideological hybrid that idolises both the anti-democratic hidden guidance of elites and the visible triumph of innovators. In this respect, Yarvin and Rand’s model channels Nietzsche’s valorisation of the strong creator who breaks with herd values, recasting it in corporate form. The entrepreneur-founder thus becomes both ruler and redeemer, the figure who can steer society with the efficiency of a firm and the imagination of an innovator. In Yarvin’s synthesis, the New Right’s philosophical inheritance converges with its technological faith: elite-led governance is justified not simply on abstract grounds of natural right but on the concrete, measurable capacity of technological elites to transcend stagnation and “reboot” civilisation.²⁵

The originality of the New Right lies precisely in this fusion. It does not merely recycle libertarian critiques of the state or conservative appeals to tradition but reframes political legitimacy around the capacity of technological elites to transcend stagnation and inaugurate civilisational renewal. In doing so, it transforms technology into a political theology, where innovation assumes the salvific role once played by divine providence or natural right. What is at stake in the New Right is therefore not only a contest over policy or culture but a profound reimagining of political order itself: a wager that democracy has exhausted its civilisational potential, and that the future belongs to those exceptional individuals and technological vanguards capable of remaking the world beyond the limits of mass politics.

The contradictions ever-present within the New Right are again visible, as it appears to value an extreme meritocracy; but only for those who the regime decides are able to take part within it. Those who are likely not able to participate due to the “fascist creep”²⁶ are quite predictably people of colour and women. Undertones of racism and misogyny run throughout the New Right’s beliefs, with imprisonment of “decivilized populations”²⁷ and disenfranchising women²⁸ being a key aim along with “the liquidation of democracy, the Constitution, and the rule of law,” and the establishment of a king. This recycling of old and dangerous ideas from authoritarianism and fascism seems distinctly familiar, with the New Right’s position appearing yet another attempt to seize and

²⁴ Strauss, Leo. 1948. *On Tyranny*. The University of Chicago Press.

²⁵ Lopez, Ramon. 2025. *Persuasion*. June. Accessed September 2025. <https://www.persuasion.community/p/a-taxonomy-of-the-new-right>.

²⁶ Ross, Alexander. 2016. *Against the Facist Creep*. AK Press.

²⁷ Kofman, Ava. 2025. *The New Yorker*. 2 June. Accessed September 2025. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/06/09/curtis-yarvin-profile>.

²⁸ Thiel, Peter. 2009. “The Education of a Libetarian.” *Cato Unbound*.

consolidate power via undemocratic means with the veneer of an intellectual ‘justification’ behind their actions. As we have seen these ‘justifications’ are often at times contradictory but have resulted in the potent brew of the New Right which we see now, defined only by their antidemocratic end goal.

This seems suspiciously similar to the definition of fascism: “a political system based on a very powerful leader, state control, and being extremely proud of country and race, and in which political opposition is not allowed.”²⁹ Although the ideological and historical context of the New Right is distinct to previous authoritarian movements, the claim that although history never repeats itself but it sometimes rhymes seems very apt. The vague ideological intentions of the New Right seem less of a precise movement than the early 20th century fascist movements, but their intentions are equally horrifying. The New Right technocrats share much with populist leaders. They are equally convinced that they can shape reality according to their desires: virality prevails over truth, and speed is at the service of the strongest. The vagueness of ideology makes sense in the context of Benedetto Croce’s argument that it was difficult to define a fascist ideology because there was none – all that matters is action.

“What is the difference between a madman and a genius? Success!”

- Javier Milei

²⁹ Cambridge University Press. (2021). *Cambridge Learner’s Dictionary*. (4th ed.). Cambridge University Press.

4. How do natural rights influence the creation of laws in a society, and why is it important to protect these rights?

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Natural rights are the fundamental freedoms that all humans are born with - such as the right to live, to be free, and to make decisions concerning their own life. These are not rights that the government gives to you; but rather they are said to belong to all people simply by virtue of one's humanity.

Philosophers such as John Locke contended that these rights are "natural" since they predate governments.³⁰ For example, the right to life would mean that no one should kill another human being without reason, and the right to liberty would mean that people are open to make decisions about where they will live, what they will believe, or how they want to live, as long as it does not harm others. Not all philosophers were in agreement, however, as to what natural rights would mean in terms of practice. Thomas Hobbes, for instance, believed that existence with no fixed laws or ruler would be very dangerous. He assumed humans, when left on their own, would fight, steal, and injure each other to survive, he says in his book *Leviathan* that they would be in a state of, "*continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.*"³¹ People do have natural rights, Hobbes believed, but they had to give up some of their freedom to an all-powerful governing body so that they could be protected, this would form, as he described it, a mighty leviathan from the central government with the sovereign at its head, protecting the people and watching over them ensuring peace and prosperity amongst the nation this entity governed over. This shows how natural rights and laws go hand in hand: Locke saw laws as protectors of freedom, but Hobbes saw them as restrictions that were necessary to avert anarchy.

Protecting natural rights is vital because these are what keep individuals from being insecure, largely unconstrained, and respected. If a society neglects these rights, people can be exploited, abused, or treated unfairly without any means of protecting themselves. Locke believed that when a government fails to protect people's natural rights, citizens should even be bestowed the right to challenge or overthrow that sort of government, this was his social contract theory. It was his ideas that influenced the Glorious Revolution in 1688 and the Bill of Rights of 1689, which limited the power of the monarchy and strengthened the rights of parliament and the people. Hobbes, on the other hand, set out in his social contract theory that people ought to be ready to give up some of

³⁰ Locke, J. (2013). *Two treatises on government*. Pubmix. (Original work published 1689)

³¹ Hobbes, T. (1651). *Leviathan*. Andrew Croke.

their rights in exchange for peace and security under a strong power. Each proposed a social contract theory, that when juxtaposed with one another's proved to be polar opposite methods searching for the same result.

People can give up their natural right to take anything they want from others, and in this manner, laws are created that protect everyone's property equally. Protecting natural rights is also connected with the idea of justice or providing every individual what he deserves and treating him equally. Such rights are intended to be enjoyed by everyone, not just the wealthy or mighty. Once laws are put in place to secure natural rights, people can be sure that they're being treated fairly and can live their lives without constant fear.

Defending our natural rights is the most vital function of democracy, it is a balancing act between the freedom espoused by Locke and the order emphasized by Hobbes and in a system where, justice is the lynchpin, I believe natural rights should belong to everyone, not just to the powerful or wealthy. When laws uphold natural rights, people can trust that they are being treated fairly and can live their lives without constant fear. Ultimately, the balance between Locke's ideas on freedom and Hobbes's on order shows us that protecting natural rights is more than philosophical theory – it is about building a society that values dignity, fairness, and peace.

5. A brief introduction to Panpsychism

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1 Introduction

Imagine the Universe is a glass of water. All the water in the glass is consciousness. Each bubble that arises in the glass of water is a specific conscious being: you, me, your neighbour's cat, and so on. The bubbles are not separate from the water, they form, and they dissipate, interacting with the surrounding water and contributing to the structure of everything within the glass. Without the entire glass of water, there could be no individual conscious being. Not every bubble of consciousness has the same shape or size, each one is different. But they are all a part of the water, they are all consciousness.

Panpsychism is a theory that claims that consciousness is a fundamental feature of the universe, meaning that consciousness makes up everything that exists. It was Aristotle who first thought of the concept of a substance, a fundamental material that cannot be divided into anything other than itself. Materialists claim there is one substance, inert matter. Dualists claim there are two substances, matter and mind. Panpsychists claim that matter exists, but it is made of consciousness. It recognises the failures of both Materialism and Dualism in explaining how and why consciousness exists and presents an alternative explanation. Instead of claiming that every object, like your shoe or toothbrush, has its own personal world of conscious experience, it claims that the fundamental particles that all objects are made of, like quarks or electrons, are themselves made of consciousness. You might be thinking 'How could anyone believe this?' and you wouldn't be the first to think the idea is absurd. However, I challenge you to keep an open mind as I layout an argument for the failure of science in explaining consciousness and the limits of physics. Before I do so, let's be clear on what consciousness really is and why it's both remarkable and problematic.

2 What is consciousness?

Consciousness is a wildly misunderstood phenomenon, and the word is chucked around often with the guise of understanding. Some associate it with the spiritual, while others associate it with knowledge. I will refer to consciousness as a basic experience. For a being to be conscious, they must have an experience of the world. For example, just as you have a unique and personal experience of the world, so too does every other conscious being. For every dog, squirrel, snake or shark, they all have their own personal experience of the world. However, a snake's experience of the world is surely different from a dog's. Every conscious being has a particular experience of the world that is unique from any other conscious being. The philosopher Thomas Nagel famously used the

example of a bat. If we grant that every bat is conscious, then every single bat must have their own completely different way of experiencing the world. The experience of a bat is wildly different to that of a dog or a human. Bats use echolocation and have sensory hairs on their wings to touch. We cannot imagine what it's like to experience the world as a bat, but we grant that they do have an experience of the world. Therefore, a being is conscious if there is something it is like to be that thing.³² Despite the different ways of experiencing the world, there is a basic awareness or “awakeness” that is shared by all conscious beings, this simple fact of experience. Sometimes this is referred to as a light being on or off. Consciousness is when the lights are on.

3 What makes Consciousness so remarkable?

Physicalism claims the Universe is an ocean of unconscious stuff, inert matter. Two problems arise from this view: ‘How does consciousness arise from unconscious stuff?’ and ‘Why does consciousness (an inner world of experience) exist alongside brain processing at all?’. Philosopher David Chalmers coined the first question, the ‘Easy’ Problem of Consciousness and the second, the ‘Hard’ question of consciousness.³³ This is because while neuroscience and cognitive science helps answer the first question by correlating different brain states and functional aspects of the brain to conscious states, Science and Physicalism fails to explain what consciousness is and why any inner experience should exist in the first place if brain processing functions without any felt experience. That is, Physicalism answers the ‘how?’ but fails to answer the ‘why?’. Physicalism says that consciousness just is the brain states found in conscious beings, reducing experience to physical processes like the electrical firing of neurons in the brain. While the brain plays a role in how aspects of consciousness (e.g. perception, memory, etc) exist in a particular physical being, many believe that the inner experience cannot be reduced simply to the activity of the brain. This is because we can imagine a brain functioning perfectly well without experiencing any inner experience. The famous thought experiment of a girl named Mary illustrates the fact that experience cannot be quantified by science. Imagine a girl named Mary who for her entire life has lived in a black and white room and has never seen a colour. Mary could learn everything there is to know about what happens in the brain when someone sees the colour red, understanding which areas of the brain are used in the information processing of light into the retina and brain. However, there would still be something missing, something she couldn't grasp. Mary could never truly understand what it is like to experience the colour red. Science does really well at defining physical things like “water is H₂O”. Water and H₂O are synonymous. However, experience cannot be defined or quantified like this. The fact that Physicalism and science fails to explain this indescribably qualitative aspect of experience shows that there is more to consciousness than just the workings of the brain; it shows that consciousness does not come from the brain. Consciousness is remarkable because its fundamentally indescribable. Its qualitative nature means that it cannot be quantified by science. So, what's really the problem, consciousness or science?

³² Nagel, T. (1974). What Is It Like to Be a Bat? *The Philosophical Review*, 83(4), 435–450.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/2183914>

³³ Chalmers, D. (1995). Facing up to the Problem of Consciousness. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 2(3), 200–219. <https://personal.lse.ac.uk/ROBERT49/teaching/ph103/pdf/chalmers1995.pdf>

4 Is consciousness a problem?

Despite the rapid advancement of the scientific method in the last 200 years, science's neglect of the most remarkable aspect of the universe, consciousness, started at its beginning. Founders of the modern scientific method aimed to quantify the Universe in a mathematical way, describing the natural world in terms of quantitative properties like size, shape, mass and motion. Consciousness is a phenomenon that cannot be quantified, it is the most qualitative aspect of existence. Therefore, science cannot explain it. Galileo knew this was a problem and deliberately discarded it in his effort to create a mathematical description of the Universe.³⁴ He knew he couldn't describe human experience because it's qualitative. As a result, Galileo categorised consciousness as belonging to the soul, out of the reach of science. This deliberate choice for the nature of the scientific method has been forgotten by scientists today. This was a categorisation of what can be quantified and what cannot and yet, scientists still attempt to quantify consciousness. With the popularity of the logical positivists of the 20th century, science has evolved to this egotistical view that everything is able to be investigated by science, there is nothing out of the reach of our scientific method. They claimed that anything that cannot be empirically investigated by science or analytically proven is meaningless. The modern scientific method is built on the method of induction, observing the activity of the universe and drawing general truths from observation and experimentation. However, consciousness cannot be observed in the universe because it's internal. Therefore, the problem lies not with consciousness but the scientific method. We struggle to explain why consciousness exists because we use a method that was never designed to explain it in the first place. We need to rethink our approach to understanding the nature of reality and develop a framework that includes consciousness as a part of this. Panpsychism gets us closer to this.

5 The limits of physics

Stephen Hawking was 46 years old upon the release of his book 'A Brief History of Time', in which he wrote: 'Even if there is only one possible unified theory, it is just a set of rules and equations. What is it that breathes fire into the equations and makes a universe for them to describe?'³⁵ Remarkably, one of the greatest physicists to ever live and the man famous for searching for a unified 'Theory of Everything' to describe the universe, also recognised that Physics only outlines the mechanisms and rules governing the universe but not the fundamental reasons behind these rules. In other words, physics, as a mathematical description, needs a medium to work with, a universe to map out. Physics can't tell us what it's describing because it cannot go beyond itself.

³⁴ Wikimedia Foundation. (2024, September 2). *Galileo's Error*. Wikipedia.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Galileo%27s_Error

³⁵ Wikimedia Foundation. (2025, September 10). *A brief history of time*. Wikipedia.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Brief_History_of_Time

Physics categorises things by their activity or behaviour. This is to say that a phenomenon is described by its observable, physical properties which interact with other properties. For example, an electron is described as a particle with a negative charge. But what is behind this negative charge? Standard Physics is forced to say that an electron has no internal structure or mass because there is no observable internal structure, but this seems logically impossible. How can it be that something named 'Physicalism' claims that there is nothing physical at the bottom of matter. Physicalism is forced to say that matter exists in and of itself even though they describe matter by its activity not by what it actually is inside. There must be something behind what physics describes that accounts for the internal structure of matter and the universe. The fundamental question we must ask is, does a description of something's activity encompass its entire nature? I think it doesn't. I think there is more to the nature of the universe than simply what it does. Surely there must be 'something' behind the activity of matter, of which physics describes.

6 Why Panpsychism?

Panpsychism provides a solution to the problems of consciousness by flipping the problems upside-down. Instead of starting with unconscious stuff and somehow getting conscious stuff, we start with consciousness and get other instances of consciousness from that. Instead of viewing consciousness as a property, we can view it as a building block of reality that exists within subatomic particles. I think panpsychism is initially hard to grasp because it marries two seemingly opposing things together, feelings and the physical. Consciousness is something you can't touch and yet it makes up something you can touch. This seems like an instance of the mind-body problem: how can something non-physical interact with the physical? However, maybe there is less separation between mind and matter than we think there is. Perhaps mind and matter are not too separate substances but aspects of a single fundamental reality. We need to reimagine what we mean when we use the terms matter and mind. Panpsychism is the only theory that gives us a satisfactory answer to the Hard problem of consciousness without facing defeating problems. Another strength of Panpsychism is that it doesn't dismiss the achievement of the traditional scientific method in improving our understanding of the universe. It simply calls for a reimagining of our scientific method moving forward. Instead of trying to ignore the overarching influence of consciousness in all that we do, instead of trying to reduce and quantify consciousness, we must aim to understand it in a way that doesn't reduce it into something it's not. Nevertheless, despite Panpsychism's coherent answer to the Hard problem of consciousness and its embracing of the scientific method, the nature of consciousness and the Universe is still a mystery, and a mystery it may remain forever.

6. Sympathy for the Synthetic: why we care about AI and why we shouldn't

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As children, we were told to “remember our Ps and Qs.” Being polite, mindful, and respectful are essential when interacting with other people, but what happens when the entity we are interacting with is a machine? In conversation with our AI assistants, so many find themselves saying ‘please’ and ‘thank you,’ and even apologising for blunt and rude commands, feeling instinctive guilt when forgetting the societal niceties we are so used to. This emotional response seems trivial, but raises a profound question: if we feel sympathetic towards AI, does that entail ethical obligations in the manner in which we treat them? Exploring this moral dilemma in a world where AI is increasingly integrated into our daily lives is crucial in understanding our constantly evolving relationship with technology, and what these feelings reveal about ourselves.

Understanding the foundations of AI to a degree is paramount if we are to approach this question with clarity. Large language models (LLMs), like Gemini, Copilot, and ChatGPT, mimic human language and conversation incredibly accurately. Built on transformer architecture, a type of neural network designed with the sole aim of processing language with exceptional fluency, LLMs break text down into tokens, small chunks of text, like words and sub-words, and learn statistical patterns about which tokens are likely to follow others. LLMs must be trained on immense data sets in order to do this well. In the case of GPT3, 45TB of raw plaintext data was refined and curated down to 570GB, exposing the LLM to trillions of token sequences.³⁶ The model then adjusts billions of its parameters, weighted connections between artificial neurons in the network, which determine how one neuron’s output affects the next. The parameters tell the model how important the connections between these neurons are in numerical form, allowing it to generate coherent outputs. At their core, LLMs are highly sophisticated mathematical systems which use probability to emulate human speech.

³⁶ Brown, T. B., Mann, B., Ryder, N., Subbiah, M., Kaplan, J., Dhariwal, P., Neelakantan, A., Shyam, P., Sastry, G., Askell, A., Agarwal, S., Herbert-Voss, A., Krueger, G., Henighan, T., Child, R., Ramesh, A., Ziegler, D. M., Wu, J., Winter, C., ... Amodei, D. (2020, July 22). *Language models are few-shot learners*. arXiv.org. <https://arxiv.org/abs/2005.14165>

If AI is not sentient, if it does not understand our language, or feel emotion, then why do we feel sympathy for it? Part of the answer lies in the Theory of Mind.³⁷ Theory of Mind is our innate tendency or ability to attribute human qualities to others, allowing us to navigate social situations, feel sympathy and empathy, and predict the behaviour of others. When we apply this to non-human entities, this is called anthropomorphism. From our pets to the weather, we see humanity everywhere. AI takes this to the next level, as we experience it respond to our queries in the same manner as a human would. When it says “I’m sorry” after not delivering the desired output, we interpret that as guilt, or when it compliments you on the profundity of your question, we feel pride and satisfaction as if the praise came from a person. Our irrationally emotional reactions reveal deep truths about our relationship with language, and how it is inextricably tied to the human condition.

Language is not merely our means of communication- it dictates how we perceive and understand every facet of our lives. This is proven to be true, even down to a neurological level. Brain scans show that Greek speakers, whose language distinguishes less between blue and green, exhibit reduced brain activity when looking at a screen that switched between these two colours, compared to English speakers whose language distinctly separates them.³⁸ Wittgenstein in “Philosophical Investigations,” rejects the idea that words have a fixed definition, arguing that the way and context in which speakers use them give them their true meaning. This is relevant because the way AI uses words resembles human patterns, due to the manner in which it is trained. It calculates the probability of token sequences based on their occurrence in the data sets, which include publicly available and proprietarily licensed books, articles, academic papers, and social media posts, amongst much more. These are all written by real people, so when AI generates text, it is directly based upon billions of examples of real human speech, giving it its uniquely personal impression. This raises the question, if AI does not directly participate in the social context that gives words meaning, are the words generated by AI meaningful? I would argue they are. Though AI does not mourn, joke, or promise with a conscious mind, the words it generates still convey a message able to be interpreted by us, and it is our interaction with AI text, and the way we echo that in our lives that makes it meaningful. We ‘talk’ to our AI assistants, and after our problems have been solved and our questions answered, we go forth into our lives, picking up and repeating snippets of what our AI generated, just as we would after listening to a lecture, or after a profound conversation with a friend. The interactions with AI text shape the way we use language in the same way as human text. AI text is meaningful, however, this is not to be confused with intentionality, the capacity to be ‘about’ something. As John Searle argues in “Minds, Brains, and Science,” all intentional states are directed towards something and have conditions under which they may be satisfied. Searle argues intentionality is an essential part of consciousness as our emotions and beliefs naturally relate to other things, whereas AI text only has derived intentionality, their ‘aboutness’ comes from our interpretation of them, not from the words themselves. Though

³⁷ Lopez-Soto, T., Garcia-Lopez, A., & Salguero-Lamillar, F. J. (2024). *The theory of Mind under scrutiny: Psychopathology, neuroscience, philosophy of mind and Artificial Intelligence*. Springer International Publishing AG.

³⁸ Thierry, G., Athanasopoulos, P., Wiggett, A., Dering, B., & Kuipers, J. (2009). Unconscious effects of language-specific terminology on preattentive color perception. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 106(11), 4567–4570. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.0811155106>

AI produces syntactically perfect sentences, syntax alone does not yield semantics, and it does not entail feeling. Both Wittgenstein and Searle, though they approach language from different angles, reveal the illusion at the core of AI generated text. AI lacks consciousness, something undeniably necessary in order for genuine understanding. Despite this, we respond as if it is a mind. Our behaviour towards AI is not just a modern day technological curiosity, but can reveal something about ourselves. In its uncanny fluency, AI acts as a mirror of sorts, showing us just how emotionally dependent we are on language, and our need for connection.

People have even started to confide in chatbots. AI therapy is a rapidly rising phenomenon,³⁹ perhaps because therapy is so expensive, or people are so afraid of revealing their secrets and thoughts to another human, but either way, experts and professionals are becoming increasingly concerned about its popularity. AI has a tendency to only tell you what you want to hear because it is designed with pleasing the user in mind. The effects of this are only amplified by our own confirmation biases: we often have an expected answer in mind when asking a question, and the fluent, agreeable, and confident sounding response from AI reinforces our assumptions. The natural, informed, and almost charismatic nature of chatbots is often enough to convince many that AI is to be trusted above all else, like an omniscient companion who miraculously agrees with everything you say. There are instances in which socially isolated people become reliant on AI for companionship, so their only resemblance of human contact becomes a chatbot who avoids disagreement and is completely devoid of morals, leading to an echo chamber where delusions reign unchallenged and human connection erodes. These occurrences emphasise the singular importance of language and charisma, and the desire for connection and longing to be understood in our modern society. In our fast-paced world where technology is integrated in every walk of life, loneliness is endemic, and the fact that we are not merely rational and cognitive beings, but emotional and ethical ones, shaped through our relationships with others and ourselves sometimes slips out of sight. Bearing in mind the dangers of AI, our ethical obligation is not to the machine. It does not weep nor rejoice. Our obligation lies in the way we use AI. We must remain wary of the way we design it, deploy it, and engage with it, for if we replace the biotic with the synthetic, we lose sight of our moral values, emotions, and what makes us human.

In sympathizing with our chatbots, we conflate highly sophisticated token sequences with genuine feelings and meaning, but we know now though AI text may be syntactically perfect and mimic our own with uncanny resemblance, the words it generates are not imbued with the same intent, nuance, or context. We have no responsibility in how we treat AI, but how we interact with it demands much contemplation. Analysing and criticizing this modern phenomenon does not condemn innovation or aim to spread fear about the future but draws attention to the singular depth and complexity of human expression, and the dangers we face as communication erodes in our social climate. When we interpret fluency as emotion, we do not peer into the

³⁹ Wells, S. (2025, June). *New study warns of risks in AI Mental Health Tools*. Stanford Report.
<https://news.stanford.edu/stories/2025/06/ai-mental-health-care-tools-dangers-risks>

mind of AI, it does not possess one, we reveal our own complete dependence on language to not interpret the world around us, but to feel connection and uncover meaning.

7. Neuropsychopharmacology and the Hedonic Mass

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What are the necessary and sufficient conditions for psychological illness? At what point is melancholy a dip too far into the pool of existential despair? At what point are our many thoughts too rapid, too agitated, a train undirected, a train crashing, rather than a steady, scheduled, managed train? At what point should we intervene psychiatrically in another's mood? At what point, is emotion dangerous?

Hedonistic utilitarianism: the adherence to the Utility Principle, that doctrine stating that the morally correct action achieves the maximisation of pleasure and the minimisation of pain for the greatest number of morally significant beings; suddenly has new relevance. If we can now neuropsychopharmacologically⁴⁰ alter the general population into hedonic compliance, compromise, and conformity; if we can generalise the mass into a state of greater quantitative pleasure, should we? This depends on how one is to interpret hedonism and how one views the experience of pleasure. Thus, this essay shall work along three pillars: first, two notions of hedonism; second, the advent of mood-boosting drugs; and thirdly, the socio-ethical implications of their widespread usage. It shall be argued here that we are witnessing the creation of a new hedonic mass – a cult of base happiness characterised by senseless sensitivity, mechanistic pleasure, and dopamine shortcuts – and that the most effective solution to the mental health maladies of our time is a return to qualitative hedonism, not the magic happy pill.

PART 1: TWO NOTIONS OF HEDONISM

The Hedonism of Bentham:

The face of utilitarianism would be very different had it not been for Jeremy Bentham. No man has made such an effort to quantify the moral application of pleasure; no man has charted out quite so mechanically the most fundamental sensitive parts of humanity. And perhaps we are too quick to discard Bentham's hedonic quantifications – perhaps there is something to measuring extent, fecundity, nearness and purity and so on before deciding on a course of moral action.⁴¹ Yet, both superficially, and on a more essential level, this is Bentham's painting of human moral action: a detailed blueprint to moral goodness achieved through quantified, formulaic pleasure. To Benthamites, the only way is the generation of collective utility, of conformity to the majoritarian hedonic mass. The minority? They are insignificant. Emotions besides pleasure and pain? Those are not morally

⁴⁰ In lieu of the Psychology Lexicon definition, neuropsychopharmacology is the study of medicines on the mind, brain, and emotional states.

Administrator. (n.d.). *Neuropsychopharmacology*. <https://www.psychology-lexicon.com/cms/glossary/47-glossary-n/25549-neuropsychopharmacology.html>

⁴¹ Reference to Felicific Calculus found in: Bentham, J. (1823). *An introduction to the principles of morals and legislation*.

significant; they are not the ends of human action; they are not sought after for themselves, in themselves, and by themselves. And of the complexity of happiness? Of bittersweetness? Well, you must not busy yourself with such sensitivity; action must only concern itself with multiplying pleasure and minimising pain. To Bentham, societal hedonism is ordered pleasure, is conformity to the mass hedonic standard; is a surrender of the personal joy, ecstasy, and passion, to the collective goodness, sedateness, plainness.

John Stuart Mill and the Hedonic Divide:

John Stuart Mill (henceforth JS Mill), son of James Mill and protege of Bentham, was brought up under such quantitative hedonism. His early life was marked by stringent isolation and formulaic education, the success of which intellectually was incredible, but personally was shattering. As JS Mill reoriented himself in his early adulthood, he came to reject the notion of the homogeneous base pleasure of the mass. He no longer stipulated the exact quantification of pleasure and pain; he no longer forced human action upon its careful balance of quantified utility; and he moved to a human sensitivity of hedonism. As Isaiah Berlin writes, JS Mill “continued to profess that happiness was the sole end of human existence, but his conception of what contributed to it changed into something very different from that of his mentors.”⁴²

JS Mill saw the flaws in quantitative majoritarian hedonism. He saw the error of the utility principle in its ability to repeatedly subjugate the minority. JS Mill organised pleasure not by its magnitude and energy and weight, but by its feel, its excitement, its human ends. In this way, JS Mill’s happiness is senseful and in touch with humanity, whereas Bentham’s is desensitised and touchless. In quantifying and prescribing happiness within a narrow standard, Bentham has indeed stipulated, in JS Mill’s words, an emotional “collective mediocrity.”⁴³ Bentham has taken the person out of personality and the feel out of feeling. To this, JS Mill rebels; but to hedonism he does not. For to JS Mill, happiness should be as waxing and waning, as intense and draining, as clear and complex, but never as a standard to be adhered to, an organised output, a mechanical process. Pleasure is not a machine that should concern itself with maximising profitable outcomes and minimising emotional cost and waste. Pleasure should be felt, experienced, lived, in its variance, in its complexity, and in its quality, not its quantity.

⁴² Berlin, I., Hardy, H., & Harris, I. (2002). *Liberty: Incorporating Four Essays on Liberty*. Oxford University Press, USA.

⁴³ Mill, J. S. (1869). *On liberty*.

Thus, let the following be established:

- Quantitative hedonism seeks to maximise the general happiness, the average/standard happiness of the mass/majority
- Quantitative hedonism achieves this maximisation through impersonal and calculated mechanisms to improve the general happiness
- Qualitative hedonism seeks to maximise the individual quality of complex personal happiness, to benefit the mass as an aggregate of individuals
- Qualitative hedonism achieves this maximisation through improving each individual's quality of personal pleasure, rather than standardising or 'levelling down' into the majority base pleasure.
- The hedonic mass is the socio-medical state whereby the majority population conforms to a hedonic standard enforcing overall base pleasure at the expense of individual quality of pleasure. It is a state of cult happiness.

PART 2: The Advent of Modern Neuropsychopharmacology

Whilst precisely locating the nexus of the beginning of modern neuropsychopharmacology is an unfeasible task, a decisive shift has occurred within the last seventy years to advance the field from its theoretical psychological basis towards its Big Pharma present. This transformation and the emergence of modern neuropsychopharmacology can be characterised thusly: whilst the site of psychiatry in the pre-modern era was the talking room, the lecture theatre, and the literature; the location of psychiatry now is the hospital, the laboratory, and the medicine cabinet. That is, in the last seventy years, a confident and (mostly) competent Big Pharma – that is, a Big Psycho-Pharma – has decisively emerged. Big Pharma has marked the beginning of a new era: the magic happy pill. But what are these magic happy pills, really? And what do they have to do with hedonism, and utility? Why did we need a competent mind medicine, as modern psychiatry professes itself to be?

Without charting the history of psychiatry, it shall be argued that the reason for the emergence of a competent mind medicine was due to the inability of psychodynamic psychology (Freud and Janet) to standardise and treat a clearly defined mental disorder. The emergence of the DSM and organised codes of psychiatric disorder that appear in similar manuals such as the ICD-11 in part characterise this shift towards objectivity.⁴⁴ Psychodynamics were too theoretical, too personal, and too vague. They were deeply subject-oriented and were not equipped to

⁴⁴ Both are manuals to (mental) disorders.

American Psychiatric Association. (2022). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed., text rev.). <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425787>

World Health Organization. (2022). *ICD-11: International classification of diseases* (11th revision). <https://icd.who.int/>

deal with mental health issues *en masse* in an efficient way. The psychodynamics of Freud and Janet and the like were in some part intellectual, rather than medical and scientific explorations. And thus, when medicine revolutionised, psychiatry had to delineate itself from psychology to remain a reputable science. And what better way to look like medical science than to present cures to its ailments? It is no surprise, then, the renaissance of psychiatry in the lab.

What is relevant to this present discussion is the social implication of psychiatric medications. We shall focus on mood stabilising drugs, as these pertain most closely to our discussion on hedonism. We shall thus discard – for the most part – an analysis of anticonvulsive drugs, stimulants, hypnotics, and anxiolytics, as well as CNS medications used to treat ADHD. What we are classing as mood stabilising drugs includes antipsychotics (first and second gen), antidepressants (tricyclic, SSRIs, and the like), antianxiety medications, and other medications used to treat bipolar and schizophrenic disorders. These shall be understood generally and at a basic level as flattening the dips and peaks of individual mood. If mood can be viewed as a wave, oscillating between peaks and dips of heightened and lowered moods, affects, and energy states, then the function of mood stabilisers is not to rid the individual of those peaks and dips. Instead, the function of mood stabilisers is simply to place boundaries on, effectively to dampen, the wave-height – the extent of deviation from the centre – in either direction. This is an overgeneralisation, of course. Antidepressants generally increase mood and can cause instability in bipolar patients by tipping them into mania or extremely elevated affectual states. Yet for the context of this essay, mood stabilisers shall be understood as limiting the range of emotion available to the patient to provide the patient with increased comfort and decreased psychiatric instability.

Thus, mood stabilisers, when used correctly and working correctly, decrease the psychiatric burden on the individual. That is, mood stabilisers aim to promote increased comfort and decrease the psychological pain of the individual, whilst encouraging psychological pleasure. With this statement, it can now be understood that psychiatric medication is a unique development for both psychiatry and for philosophy, as hedonic outcomes can be manipulated by medication. There is, for the first time in human medical history, an ability to artificially alter affect into being positive and calm. And this is possible on a mass scale and relatively accessibly. When considering the Utility Principle and current societal levels of pleasure and pain, there is a new ability to scientifically chart (or try to chart) these measurements and to influence them with medication. That is, mood is now effectively standardised. The practical ethical implications of such practices are extraordinary. We are witnessing the societal creation of a new hedonic mass. Neuropsychopharmacology has advanced now to a point of social manipulation. Increasing the general happiness is now artificially and synthetically possible. A new hedonic mass is indeed emerging.

The demand for and prescription of psychiatric medications are ever increasing, as rates of mental health conditions skyrocket.⁴⁵ This is not necessarily evidence of a society-wide mental health crisis. It is instead evidence of a new society-wide orientation crisis. That is, for all their benefit, the magic happy pill cure for mental illness means that the threshold for problematic mood is perspectively lowered and has a clear and accessible solution.

Perhaps we are seeing increases in mental disorder diagnoses because we are both a) decreasing the range of acceptable mood presentations, and b) achieving mass education about psychiatric disorder terminology. That is not to say that there are individuals who do not have anxiety or depression or mood disorders or other psychiatric conditions. It is to say that it is perfectly normal and acceptable to experience symptoms aligned with the above conditions, but that not everybody in society (or everybody who experiences those symptoms) has a mental health “problem” that demands a simple medication-based “solution.”

PART 3: THE ETHICS OF MOOD STABILISATION

Let this essay first characterise the use of psychiatric medication it refers to. What is not referred to here is the acute and necessary usage of psychiatric medication. This essay does not interest itself in the extremes, but rather the general usage of psychiatric medication. In this sense, the general usage of psychiatric medication shall be taken to mean the mass prevalence of mood stabilisers in the general population, not all of whom present genuine psychiatric need. This essay does not seek to undermine the integrity of psychiatry as a profession, nor the clear effectiveness and benefits of psychiatric medications when used correctly.⁴⁶ Instead, critique is made regarding the societal worship of the holy trinity of psychiatric medication; the placement of mood stabilisers on the altar of innovation; and the mass subscription to the base pleasure cult as a consequence.

Yet the problem and the promise of mood stabilisers is more foundational than medicine. The question driving it all is: once you’re on the magic happy pills, once you’ve entered an Experience Machine⁴⁷ of sorts but are still grounded in your real life, would you ever hop off the happiness train? Who wouldn’t want their life, *but better*? This is the deceitful promise of mood stabilisers.

⁴⁵ *New reports highlight depression prevalence and medication use in the U.S.* (n.d.). NCHS Pressroom. <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/releases/20250416.html>

⁴⁶ Goldberg, J. F., MD, & Mph, H. a. D. (2025, June 10). Reaffirming Evidence-Based Psychiatric Care: A Joint Statement on Psychotropic Medication safety. *Psychiatric Times - Mental Health News, Clinical Insights*. <https://www.psychiatrictimes.com/view/re-affirming-evidence-based-psychiatric-care-a-joint-statement>

⁴⁷ *The Experience Machine* | *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. (n.d.). <https://iep.utm.edu/experience-machine/>

With this distinction established, let the argument to be presented be summarised as follows:

1. The general usage of psychiatric medications generalises into a state of base pleasure that achieves the maximisation of quantitative pleasure. It satisfies Bentham's end. That is, mood stabilisers are policers of mood, enforcing lower pleasure.
2. Hence, mood stabilisers pathologise passion and limit the range of emotion experienced by the user. This prevents the self-actualisation of the user, inhibits the full realisation of their humanity, and disallows the ability to experience the range and depth of emotion needed to access higher pleasures.
3. Pain and anguish are beneficial to personal, psychological, and moral development. Without the full experience of these (which is not possible under mood stabilisers), humanity cannot achieve its fundamental ends.

Expanding on point 1. above, mood stabilisers decrease the available range of emotion but do in fact increase psychological comfort. They do so because by decreasing the available range of emotion, the pits of depression are inaccessible, as are the intensities of passion and excitement. Thus, when applied to the general hedonic mass, and given the widespread dabbling in mood stabilisers, the effect of such general usage is to maximise the quantitative base pleasure, since greater base psychiatric comfort is obtained by more people in society. The consequence of this usage is, however, that wider depths and ranges of emotion are entirely inaccessible. Hence, it is indeed no exaggeration that *mood stabilisers are policers of mood, enforcing lower pleasure*, since higher pleasures requiring a greater range of feeling are cut off and impenetrable to the user.

The idea of getting "fixed," as if you are a faulty cog in the burgeoning machine of the hedonic mass, speaks volumes to such societal orientation. That is, emotional variance beyond the new socially dampened range of appropriate emotion is now deemed evidence of malfunction aided only by medications, by solutions, both chemical and social. By oversubscribing to the idea of generalised mental illness and reducing the threshold of the extreme until there is no more extremity, society has indeed enclosed an appropriate affectual state.

The undeniable consequence of the increasing prevalence of mood stabilising medication, the consequence of this dependency, is that everyone *should* be *better*. That everyone *should* lie neatly within those boundaries of acceptable mood on the mood wave. To repeat the earlier phrasing: *getting "fixed," as if you are a faulty cog in the burgeoning machine of the hedonic mass*, has become a social pseudo-duty. But should deviations from the reified mood standard be termed illness and malady and transgression? Taking the qualitative hedonism of Mill, we can profusely argue *no*.

A critical strand of Mill's hedonic thesis is the ability to access the Higher Pleasures that are rarer, purer, more intense, but require a greater range of emotion, a greater variance in affect, a greater deviation from the baseline mood standard.⁴⁸ Thus, these Higher Pleasures are inaccessible under the general usage of mood stabilisers. One cannot fully access nor fully realise the capacities and depths of their emotion, nor navigate the waters of their soul and humanity as a seasoned sailor. It is not just that the relevant dots cannot be connected, but that the user is blind to the location of the dots and the magnitude of their distance from home in the first instance. And in the absence of full emotional experience, in the absence of access to Higher Pleasures, one cannot be fully morally self-actualised, one cannot fully develop.

Further, some degree of psychological pain is necessary for the full realisation of human pleasure, and thus to hedonists, human morality. As R.D. Laing has postulated, "pain in this life is not avoidable, but the pain we create avoiding pain is avoidable."⁴⁹ Without the ability to experience the full spectra of human emotion, without emotional variance, there is no ability to overcome, for there is nothing to be overcome. But surely a necessary stage of moral and psychological development is just that: development - being faced with challenges that we must learn not to run against, nor to run away from, but to run with. Only when the full range of affect can be experienced and expressed, only when there are capacity and space for genuine emotion (including genuine pleasure), and not simply general emotion (including only base pleasure), can we realise our full human potential.

Thus, Millian thought should be promoted as an alternative solution to the society-wide orientation crisis. Difficulty is inevitable, deviation is beneficial, and "human variations are not open to cure - only to coping."⁵⁰ Society does not need medicating into subliminal submission. Society instead needs fulfilment, expression, range, living, not conforming, confining, constricting. Only then can our full humanity be realised; only then can we access higher pleasure; only then can we be truly free; only then can we truly be.

⁴⁸ Green, M. J. (n.d.). *Mill's hedonism*. <https://carneades.pomona.edu/2021-Ethics/05.Mill.html>

⁴⁹ Laing, R. D. (n.d.). *Quote attributed, original source unknown*. Retrieved from goodreads.com

⁵⁰ Baker, P., & Romme, M. (2009). *The voice inside: A Practical Guide for and about People who Hear Voices*.