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THE UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS OF SELF-INDUCED MIND CORRUPTION

By

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מרכז פדרמן לחקר הרציונליות

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The unbearable lightness of self-induced mind corruption.

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This is the second time in its 48 year history that SPUDM takes place in Israel. The first time was in 1995, in Jerusalem. There was a reason it took a quarter century for SPUDM to come to Israel, and it had nothing to do with the question whether Israel is part of Asia (which is geographically correct) or of Europe (which is probably socially, culturally, and politically correct). The Iron Curtain which divided Europe since WWII was as painful to Europeans as the Armistice border cutting through the city of Jerusalem from 1948 to 1967 was to Israelis. The early founders of SPUDM considered their mission not only to promote and give voice to the study of decision making in Europe, but also to make sure that East Europeans could attend. Since during the Soviet regime, no Communist Bloc country would allow its scientists to attend a conference in Israel – Israel was not an eligible venue.

This politically driven commitment played an important role during SPUDM's first 20 years, and was backed by financial commitment, where the Western countries essentially subsidized the Eastern countries. It was a noble commitment, because in truth, our Eastern European colleagues were truly handicapped, not only with regard to the financial resources needed to travel to the West, but also in the less tangible resources – with freedom topping them – needed to pursue a serious scientific agenda.

SPUDM was deliberately held several times "behind the Iron Curtain": in Warsaw (1977), Budapest (1981), and Moscow (1989). It was difficult for Israelis to attend those conferences, since Israel did not even have diplomatic relations with the Communist countries. SPUDM made it a condition that none of its members would be excluded by the host country. Thus I received my visa for the Budapest conference on a removable slip of paper, rather than stamped into my passport. It was issued in the closed offices of the Hungarian embassy in Vienna on a Sunday morning, hours before the opening of the conference. As for Moscow – I missed it, because my promised visa was confirmed – not by chance, I assure you – the day before the conference opening. Way too short a notice to act upon in those days – and way too short a notice to penalize the Soviets for their tactics.

SPUDM was also deliberately scheduled in late August. This being an inconvenient time for many American academics ensured that the adamantly European conference would not be overrun by Americans. But the highly motivated scholars who crossed the Atlantic regardless were much appreciated precisely because they overcame this hurdle. The association expressed its gratitude by always having a token American in the Organizing Committee.

I remember how in August, 1991, in the middle of the SPUDM conference then held in Fribourg, Switzerland, we heard the dramatic news of the attempted Soviet coup d'état to oust Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev. The coup collapsed in only two days, but the event destabilized the Soviet Union, and is widely considered to have contributed to its dissolution. By the next SPUDM, in 1993, the association was ready to come to Israel, although Israel was undergoing the first Intifada – the Palestinian popular, and violent, uprising against the Israeli occupation. The Jerusalem meeting in 1995 was the best attended SPUDM till then, and indeed included quite a few scholars from the former Soviet bloc – Russia, Poland, East Germany, and the Czech Republic.

Towards its end, Dick Thaler took the podium to give some tips regarding what the attendees could expect from Israeli security upon departure. "They will ask you what brought you to Israel", said Dick. "Tell them you attended

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My talk was limited to 30 minutes. Interest in the opening section about SPUDM prodded me to add some lines. Paragraphs 3 and 4 expand on what was delivered orally.

I thank Ro'i Zultan for formatting this talk into its present form.

an international conference. It would be prudent to have the program book with you, as proof. They might ask you if you gave a talk, and it might be prudent to have your paper on you." Here Dick paused for a moment: "Although I doubt they'll ask you to give it". The audience laughed.

A couple of days later, some SPUDM participants were crossing the land border into the Sinai, a part of Egypt. It being August, universities were closed for the summer, and many students were working in security on Israel's busy summer borders. As Dick had predicted, our colleagues were asked what they had been doing in Israel. It so happened that the security guard this group encountered was a student of Psychology. She got all excited when the name of Amos Tversky came up. "I studied his work!", she shrieked happily. "Did you give a talk?". As per Dick's instructions, the paper was produced. But here Dick's forecast failed. Because: "Hey, would you mind presenting it?", begged the guard.

As we like to say here – only in Israel.

A history of SPUDM from its inception through 1997, written by SPUDM elder Charles Vlek, can be found on the EADM site. When I was invited to give this special presentation, the expectation was that I would continue the history of the past 20 years, or talk about JDM research in Israel. I began to work on this task, but found it boring. (Which reminds me of something Amos Tversky used to say about history books: "Isn't it odd how dull they are, considering that they're mostly fiction."). But in truth I was given this slot not so much because SPUDM needed another history, but as a tribute to my status as tribe elder. I requested, and received, permission to talk about anything I chose. And I chose to talk about The Unbearable Lightness of Self-Induced Mind Corruption.

Mind corruption is any process which prevents the mind from functioning properly. Age, toxins, and various externalities, often conspire to corrupt our minds. But I will focus exclusively on how we can, and do, corrupt our own minds, deliberately and intentionally.

My examples will not be taken directly from research, either my own or that of others. But they are nonetheless well grounded in psychology, and essentially empirical, as they are all based on informed introspection. You are welcome – indeed, encouraged – to turn them into proper psychological experiments.

1 Self-Induced Corruption of Perception "How blind can one be??"

Most, if not all, of you have probably seen the video called "The Selective Attention Test", no doubt one of the more startling demonstrations that one can reliably reproduce in any class or public lecture. Whether you have previously seen it or not, please try as hard as you can to follow the instructions meticulously. Here is a link to it: `https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJG698U2Mvo_`.

Did you see the gorilla? Lay people find it quite impossible that a large black gorilla should slowly walk into a smallish area, stop in its middle whilst pounding on its chest for a few seconds, and then walk slow and tall out of the room – all this without being seen by people who are looking at the very area where all this is taking place. Yet this is precisely what happens to about half of first time viewers of this video.

I used to think that once you've seen the gorilla, you will never miss it again. Some demos are allegedly like that, e.g., the famous low-resolution Dalmatian. But this, in fact, is not quite true of the gorilla. In my own experience, it is not very hard to make the gorilla "disappear" again – even when you know full well that it is there. In fact, you can try it yourself right now.

The "trick" is simple: you must follow the original instructions as carefully and devotedly as one can, deliberately giving your full attention to the count you have to take. I don't have data on how typical I am, but studies of the so-called "divided attention" paradigm, have previously noted that some people miss the gorilla even in a repeat exposure. The "paradigm" I'm offering is not missing it as a side effect, but as a sought after effect. In other words, if you define your goal as missing the gorilla, you stand a good chance of achieving it by giving the counting task your undivided attention.

Inattention blindness is, of course, also responsible for gun blindness, and for reports of people in war and other emergencies who feel no pain from a serious wound until they are no longer busy just surviving. It also validates grandmotherly advice to "think of other things" (i.e., direct your attention elsewhere) as a way of combating pain, distress or any attention capturing stimuli. And please take

this grandmother's advice: Never-ever use your smartphone while driving. It will corrupt your driving mind no less than alcohol does – and hamper your motor skill to boot.

2 Self-Induced Corruption of Memory "Did I or didn't I?"

It is a cliché that one can make an effort to remember, but cannot make an effort to forget. This cliché is debatable, but I will not debate it here. Here I want to tell you how with only a little effort, you can create a false memory. Like the vanishing gorilla, in my personal experience, at least, the necessary conditions are simple and reliable enough that I can make it happen more or less at will. Moreover, it can happen even as I am fully aware that I am making it happen. My private term for the process is "morphing into false memory". I will first digress to talk about morphing.

I have always been fascinated by on-screen morphing (Google morphing videos for many fun examples, e.g., `https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8_PQtsVvyrQ`, an Obama-Putin morphing). On several occasions, I have undergone a kind of spontaneous morphing experience myself.

Once I was invited to the wedding of the son of friends from my youth. My hosts said I would be seated at a table with those old-times friends, some of whom I hadn't seen in nearly three decades. I arrived, a bit late. The tables were set outdoors under the starry night sky. I wandered among them, peering into dimly lit faces, looking for my old friends, and dismissing table after table for not matching the image I had in mind.

Then I did a double take. The table I had just dismissed because its occupants were too old to qualify was, in fact, the table I was looking for! Those old folk were the friends of my youth, now thirty years older than when I last saw them. I returned to the table, where in front of my very eyes, the old people at the table morphed within seconds into the young people I recognized each as being. They shed the years much as one sheds a wet shirt. By the time this morphing was complete, it was not reversible. My friends no longer looked old, and I could not for the life of me reconstruct in my mind what I had seen just moments before.

If you want to undergo an illuminating morphing experience, catch yourself sometime unawares and unintentionally in an unexpected mirror. In the seconds it takes to realize you are looking at a mirror, your reflection will morph from how you look to others into how you look to yourself.

And now to "morphing into false memory".

I was planning a trip, and needed to look up something in my passport. To my alarm, the passport wasn't in the drawer where it is usually kept. I couldn't understand why it wasn't there, and couldn't remember where I had put it. Then in a flash, I recalled that the visa application I had recently filled required data from the passport. I must have taken it out then, I thought to myself, and neglected to put it back in place. Yes, yes. It had to still be on the desk where I had filled out the application.

This was not a memory. It was an inference.

In those seconds between figuring out where the passport probably lay, and my approaching the desk, I experienced a hypothesis morphing into a memory. What had begun, subjectively and phenomenologically, but undoubtedly, as a mere conjecture from cold reasoning, quickly morphed into what, subjectively and phenomenologically, and equally undoubtedly, felt exactly like a memory. I had, it seemed, just recollected where I left the passport. In my mind's eye, I could anticipate exactly where I'd find it; I could actually see it lying there, with its frayed blue cover, on the right end of the desk, partially covered by other papers. The image was, for all intents and purposes, every bit as palpable as a memory. It had the certitude and the detailed imagery of a full fledged memory. I was prepared to relate the event later as having forgotten, and then recalled, where I had misplaced my passport.

There was only one problem. The passport was not there!

I searched the desktop frantically, surprised and disturbed by its absence even more than I had earlier been by its absence from its regular place. I *knew* it was there – so why wasn't it??

I was beginning to panic slightly, when the possibility occurred to me that I must have already placed it with the other documents I had gathered in preparation for the trip. For the second time in the space of a few minutes, the result of what I knew to be a reason-derived hypothesis, morphed, within seconds, into a memory. The start of this process – namely, having a sensible idea where the passport might be, and its finalé – namely, having a vivid memory of where it was, were linked by a conscious and continuous experience in which

the former morphed into the latter as I was observing, even monitoring, the transition.

Whether or not this time the passport was indeed in the clear plastic sheath where the other papers were, exactly as I envisioned it on my way to checking, does not really matter. After all, my earlier desktop failure had prepared me for the possibility that my "memory" could be falsified by reality.

Nothing in my tale would surprise a student of memory; nothing violates what we know about memory; nothing is unusual. Providing cues to memory aids memory. The situation I described is called failure of reality monitoring (namely, a failure to distinguish between external-physical events and internal-mental events). What I found compelling is that the mental process I experienced happened in a manner that allowed its unfolding to be available for introspection. Against my better judgment, an hypothesis morphed into a memory. It's just too bad that the memory was false...

One difference between some (though certainly not all) other occasions of "And then I remembered" narratives and what I have here described, is that the memory did not spring to mind in one instantaneous flash, but rather as if it had formed incrementally, like a photo coming gradually into focus. It was intriguing – nay, mesmerizing – to observe, first hand and at close quarters, how what after the fact turned out to be a false memory was so readily and smoothly morphed into.

In this case, too, I urge you to become your own subjects. Next time you misplace something (a frequent occurrence for me), introspect on what it feels like to hypothesize where it might be, and then set out to find it there. If you're lucky, you will, in the space of seconds, construct a memory. But until you actually test it against reality, you won't know whether it is a true or false memory.

3 Self-deception
"Who are you kidding?"

Anybody can consciously adopt measures for self-control. Self control is not a puzzle. But one cannot, it seems, deliberately set about to self-deceive (that Leonard from the great film Memento could do this successfully is only because he was brain damaged). Yet a favorite self-control tactic of mine seems to rely on just such a form of self-deception. I routinely set my own clocks and watches a couple of minutes ahead. How can that help? One would think – and one would be right – that I'd know by now that when my watch says 10:58, it is really only 10:56. Yet years after I adopted the habit, it still works. The way it works, I believe, is that when I glance at my watch, there is that instant when System 1 believes what it sees. Until System 2 kicks in to remind me that I should subtract 2 minutes from the time I see displayed, I've been successfully deceived. (As an aside, according to Ruth Mayo, even System 1 wouldn't be deceived if all the time pieces all the time were consistently 2 minutes ahead – but I shan't get into that here). Therefore I live part of my life, however small, in a false time of my own design, which assists me in being on time in the real time.

This example would not embarrass or puzzle anybody who analyzes self-deception. But it is another example of the unbearable lightness of mind corruption.

4 Self-Induced Moral Corruption
"It's wrong" versus "It's yummy".

This will be the shakiest, and most personal, part of my talk. It answers why I chose the term "corruption" for my title, rather than a more neutral word like, say, "impairment". It is self-induced inasmuch as I will describe an internal dialogue, which I have hardly shared (but wish to thank Tom Noah, Ran Hassin, and Avishai Margalit for commenting on some of its ideas). I will be treading into unfamiliar territory, ignorant as I am regarding the morality literature. But I will be satisfied if I just provoke you to think about these issues, even at the cost of being irritated with me.

As I did in the false memory example, I will begin some distance away from the topic of interest, to provide the background for my soul searching.

You may, or not, know that Israel came into being as a direct consequence of the Holocaust. After the annihilation of two-thirds of European Jewry during WWII, the UN, in November 1947, guiltily voted for founding the State of Israel; ironically, tragically, it was founded on a tract of land inhabited at the time by twice as many, or more, Palestinians than Jews. The Holocaust remains an ever present event in Israeli public and political life since. We mark an annual Holocaust Remembrance Day. A two minute siren is sounded across the country, literally freezing everyone in their tracks for its duration; recreational venues are closed for the day;

and the media visit, again and again, survivors and their saviors, and ponder, again and again, the question: How did it happen?? In particular, how did a civilized, educated, cultured, country like Germany perpetrate such a crime; and perpetrate it against people no less civilized, educated, and cultured than themselves?

The most famous answer that psychology has proposed was given by Stanley Milgram, himself a Jew, who conducted the notorious Obedience Studies in the 1960s. His studies purported to show that ordinary people could act aggressively, not to say lethally, against other people, as ordinary as themselves, simply because some authority figure told them to.

The vow "never again" is a constant motto in Israeli national identity. But we all know that – except perhaps for scale – it HAS happened again. And again. And again. I have often wondered what I would have done had I been a German *Hausfrau* in Nazi Germany. Milgram's answer is no help. It sheds some light on how otherwise decent people, with a distaste for actively inflicting harm on others, nonetheless did so. But it does not say why the German populace – why the world at large – stood passively by and allowed it to happen. The answer that I have reached, albeit without Milgram's comprehensive experimental program, is "Because they could". There would have been a cost to intervene (Israel calls those who were willing to pay it "righteous gentiles"; Oscar of Shindler's List is one of the most famous of them). But if you did nothing, said nothing – you could get away with it.

Rather than deal with the historical question and its latter day parallels, I would like to change the arena to where I face a similar moral dilemma, but in a context that, at least for me, is nearly free of any distracting or mitigating elements.

The question is: "Why do I eat meat?"

The answer is: "Because I like it".

The problem is: Can I continue to think of myself as both a rational and a moral person and still today continue to buy products of the contemporary animal industry, in spite of knowing how it is run? In recent years, I have read some of the writings, philosophical and others, about animal rights in general, and have found myself persuaded by much of it. I have been moved by Jonathan Safran Foer's "Eating Animals", and by my Hebrew University colleague Yuval Noah Harari's "Sapiens". In particular, I have been persuaded of the following: the mammals we eat are sentient beings; they are endowed with intelligence, cognition and emotions, some not unlike our own; they are raised in horrific conditions, and after a short life of physical suffering they die a death of terror; raising them inflicts a cost on our entire planet, for the benefit of a privileged minority of earth's population, to which I belong; this privileged minority could probably afford the financial cost of eating animals who lived decent lives till they land on our plates; and finally, vegetarianism is not a threat to human health.

It doesn't matter, for present purposes, whether these beliefs are true or justified. I have come to believe them through a rational process. But by sincerely believing them, I have denied myself all the "good" excuses, moral and otherwise, for my dietary habits.

I should be – and when I stop to think about it, I am – in a state of dissonance. Social Psychology says that dissonance is disquieting enough that something has to give. But I can't give up the beliefs that cause the dissonance – beliefs are not chosen, they impose themselves upon us. Especially if we strive to be rational. So I should accept that I am immoral. You may think so, but for me, it would be painful to reach that conclusion. More painful, perhaps, than the state of dissonance that it will resolve. What is left? To think up a way of removing the dissonance, while leaving both the beliefs and the behavior unmodified.

I think I've figured out how to do that, but I will leave it to you to judge whether or not I am a victim of moral corruption, to which self-deception is blinding me.

Decision theory may offer a useful perspective. "Maya eats meat because she derives utility from it". Where does morality enter? "Maya loses utility from immoral behavior". Putting the two together, the conclusion is that for me at present, the cost of giving up meat must be greater than the cost of contributing to the meat industry. And that may actually be about right – especially if you note the word "at present".

The times they are a-changing. The animal rights movement is gaining popularity, and rightly so. I believe that in my lifetime, it will become increasingly difficult for decent people to be carnivores. But unless I am quite mistaken, right now, in August 2017, I can get away with a confession such

as the one I just made without incurring the wrath, disgust, or contempt of most of you. As the social cost of being a carnivore increases, and the cost of giving up meat diminishes (e.g., through the development of growing animal tissues in Petri dishes), more and more people will make the transition away from eating meat. But today, it is still very easy for carnivores to "get away with it".

Of course, for a person with conscience this seems to be irrelevant. One's conscience supposedly extracts a price for one's moral transgressions, even if nobody else knows. But not all transgressions cost the same.

There is an asymmetry between some adjectives and their antonyms. To be consistent, one needs to always be consistent. But to be inconsistent, one needn't be always inconsistent. To be a faithful, one needs to always be faithful. But to be unfaithful, one needn't always be unfaithful. What about morality? Can someone be moral sometimes, and immoral other times? And if so, is that person "moral"? I think the answer is Yes to the first question, and Depends, to the second.

The evolution of morality takes as its point of departure that we are social beings. Cooperativeness, fairness, altruism – all have social explanations. They require "others". Contemporary moral thinking has expanded the domain of "others" to whom we owe moral consideration in remarkable, not to say startling, ways. We include as yet unborn generations. And we include animals. Especially the latter have no moral sense to deplore their being treated immorally, and no power to chastise or retaliate. They have no voice. And humans arguably have no economic incentive to treat them better. In spite of this, many of us feel a moral obligation to not cause animals unnecessary suffering, even if we don't sufficiently act upon it. But as I said, the times they are a-changing. Slaves were in much the same position as animals are today. Yet slavery was abolished, against the selfish interest of slave owners, and largely in the name of morality. Looking back historically, some find it hard to understand how supposedly moral people like Thomas Jefferson could have been slave owners. Perhaps I might some day in 2027 look back upon the Maya of 2017 and wonder how I could have been a meat eater.

But for now, the fact that it would be costly for me to give up meat, since I enjoy it so much, coupled with the fact that the social cost I am presently charged for meat eating is negligible, suffices for me to continue to indulge my tastes at some moral cost, that I consider insufficient to brand me as "immoral". I hope you, too, will not thusly brand me.

And you all can judge whether you think I have managed only to kid myself – or to convince you.