

Whither Grace

A study in self-deception



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The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles

Collected Mallard Papers, Series I: States of Grace

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© 1990 Ima Duckson & Sons, Printers & Ornamental Bookwrights (design, typesetting)

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2024: February
To Arthur Blandy

Arthur,
I'll be away for one month, presenting a paper at a conference in London.

I've taken the precaution of placing the draft of my latest book securely inside the trunk. This precaution is not without reason given your legendary talent for misfiling my papers and, quite astonishingly, including them under your own name in various publications.

Fenella Vorpel

Will or representation?

Fenella Vorpel

This book owes its provocation to Schopenhauer, who declared the world to be “will and representation.” I have taken the liberty of adjusting his phrase, for I live in an age less concerned with will than with whim, and where representation has been supplanted by its cheaper cousin, misrepresentation. One need not read deeply to find the evidence: politics that thrive on contradiction, schools that teach children to mistake slogans for thought, lovers who rehearse sincerity as though it were theatre.

I am not persuaded that people lie to each other more than they ever did; I suspect only that they lie more efficiently to themselves. The great achievement of our time is not invention but inversion: we call ignorance knowledge, coercion freedom, and self-deception authenticity. I intend no consolation here—only a ledger of these inversions, traced as coolly as a coroner's report.

Preface

I will not waste your time. This is not a book of answers.

It is a record of what I have seen, what I have learned, and what I have inherited from women who refused silence.

If you are searching for comfort, you will not find it here.

If you are seeking authority to quote at dinner, you may as well close the book now.

What I offer is a series of observations: fragments, cases, irritations, and truths spoken plainly. My method is not to soothe but to expose. The patterns are old—so old that my great-grandmother wrote of them,

and my aunt demolished them word by word—yet we still pretend they are new discoveries.

We live in poverty, not only of money but of knowledge, of attention, of contribution. That poverty is no accident. It is cultivated, maintained, and defended—by governments, by institutions, by men and women who find their advantage in ignorance.

I write because I will not collude in that.

I write because silence is complicity.

And I write because, if history has taught me anything, the smallest act of truth-telling unsettles empires.

Take what you will. Reject what you cannot bear. But do not say you were not warned.

Introduction

Fenella Vorpel

I arise, fierce and independent, from a long line of intelligent women who have faced—and fought—a social system designed to overwhelm us. Ours is a family tied by blood to one of the longest-living ducal lines in Western history, yet it was not the men who carried forward our true inheritance. They had the land, the titles, the dwindling purses of primogeniture. We women, bound by the so-called “lesser” line, were left freer—within the constraints of society—to flourish in our intellectual circles.

My great-grandmother, Jeanne d’Anatis, was a formidable presence. Her career was waged in shadow: anonymous pamphlets, whispered correspondences, interventions in debates where women’s names were neither welcome nor safe. Her daughter, my grandmother Elspeth Mallard, carried the same torch, raising her own daughters to think critically, to read widely, and to resist the pieties of their age.

Any well-read person will know my mother, Viscountess Viola Vorpel, for her lectures and essays exposing how women were stifled by the poverty of education—how the “right and proper” curriculum functioned as a form of quiet suffocation. My aunt Euphemia Mallard, the celebrated Australian crime writer, was forced to publish under a male pseudonym; she paid for her voice not only in anonymity but in blood, murdered by her maid in 1934. And my aunt Octavia—scholar, etymologist, iconoclast—tore apart the very words that concealed abuse, revealing how language itself was weaponised against women.

It is from them that I write. Not as a trailblazer but as a continuation. To some, our work has been dismissed as “subversive.” So be it. What other word could men find for women who spoke with

clarity, or who refused to bow to the social controls that confined them?

The truth is not new. For over two centuries our warnings have been written, spoken, shouted, and ignored. That theft of potential—of women, of colonised peoples, of every so-called “subject” of the British Empire—still shapes the violence and ignorance of our present. We have not built a modern world, only repeated the failures of the past with shinier tools.

This book stands on the foundations laid by my ancestors. Where their words still ring true, I quote them directly, for it is sobering to see how little has changed. I do not pretend to offer solutions. The questions before us are too complex for one voice, too urgent for one mind. I offer observations and criticisms, in the hope that they may be taken up by communities willing to think carefully, act deliberately, and imagine more than the narrow future we are being herded toward.

On being a smart woman

Fenella Vorpel

At the start of my career, I was advised to publish under initials only: FC Vorpel. A woman’s name, I was told, would sink a paper before the first paragraph. Sometimes I even used my married surname—Purslane—having fallen into the romantic trap of sheltering under a man’s name.

Thus disguised, I was hailed as a rising light, a new voice for our times, a public intellectual. I published prolifically, praised for my insight, lauded for my style. My aunt Octavia warned me against the charade, but she was already notorious for her refusal to bend. I lacked her courage.

Then came a keynote invitation at an international conference. When I arrived, I was asked, with great concern, where my husband was. He, I was told, was expected to deliver the address. Slowly, and in words of one syllable, I explained that I was the author of the admired papers; that I, not some phantom husband, would be speaking. One man—shoulders flaked with dandruff—blinked and said: “Oh, but you’re a woman.”

So I delivered my lecture to a hall of men who shuffled papers and whispered through every sentence. At the end, the Q&A was empty silence.

From that day on, I published under my own name. Predictably, I was rebranded: no longer a promising thinker but a virago, an upstart, a woman who had clearly copied her ideas from some more capable man.

So be it. I took Octavia's advice: to be myself, in spite of being a woman. Better a virago than a ventriloquist's dummy for men who can barely think, let alone write.

Fenella speaks her mind

As a woman in my fifties, I look back on my thirties with a kind of pity. I then suffered from a surfeit of beauty: the object of the male gaze. I inherited it from my mother, the formidably famous and indomitable Viscountess Vorpel. She, as the record shows, wielded that gaze like a whip. Men adored her even as she thrashed them, and she made them grateful for the privilege. Her beauty was armour. Her title and her friendship with the Queen were weapons. I have neither, nor do I wish them.

I watched those same men gaze at me and remarked often, in my own books and articles, on their idiotic devotion to Venus. Worship, they called it. Idiocy with a Latin name, I called it. It was the same blindness that condemned my aunt Octavia to "spinsterhood"—or, more recently, to the lazy label of "lesbianism." She refused the conjugal sentence, and men could not forgive her. They declared her "wantonly barren," a woman who had wasted her life. Evidently an Order of Australia Medal for contributions to the intellectual capital of the nation carries less weight than a squalling infant.

For my great-aunts, the cost was higher still: miserable deaths in childbirth, no control over money, barely an education. Even my ducal cousins, those gilded Duchesses, were shackled to men who might discard them like last season's gowns.

Now we call this "progress." Women may decline children, but only at the price of careers in men's worlds, on men's terms. We may sit at the table, so long as we wear the right skirt, paint over the blemishes, accept lower salaries, and nod at patronising colleagues. And when we are raped—for dressing "provocatively"—or murdered by husbands, the law murmurs its sympathy while warning the rest of us not to make too loud a fuss.

So yes, the male gaze has shifted. From Venus on her pedestal to "empowered" women in glossy magazines. From the worship of goddesses to the marketing of lipstick. It is still the same gaze: stupid, controlling, and endlessly self-justifying.

1992: Alice Mallard

The Queen's Speech

Queen Elizabeth II has famously described the year 1992 as her *Annus Horribilis*—a horrible year—in a speech marking her fortieth anniversary on the throne. Her error in judgement is profound and cannot be dismissed as a mere lapse of phrasing, nor passed off with a titter of amusement.

True, the laughter it occasioned led me to recall my mother's remark on the etymology of *sovereign*—that it derives from *superanus*, meaning, as she so enjoyed pointing out, a “superior bum-hole.” Yet beyond the childish giggle lay something far less amusing. The Queen had spoken Latin to the nation. Had her words been merely written, their hauteur might have been softened by the page. Spoken aloud, they sounded like a revelation of how little she understood the distance between her world and ours.

For while she may well have been having an unpleasant year, her definition of unpleasantness must differ somewhat from that of the unwashed and uneducated masses. Her father, too, revealed a similar misstep in empathy during the war, when consoling a Londoner whose house had been bombed. “My house too has been hit,” he offered. The rejoinder—“which one?”—remains the definitive reply to all royal attempts at identification.

That she spoke of herself at all was the true shock. No properly raised lady, least of all a queen, would dream of making her private feelings so public. Decorum requires opacity. A monarch's sufferings, like her jewels, must be worn without explanation. If she felt obliged to speak, why not celebrate her anniversary, or the durability of her realm, or the quiet stoicism of her subjects?

Instead, she descended from her plinth and invited sympathy. She wished to be seen as one of us—while addressing us in a dead language few of us understood. There is, in that gesture, the whole tragedy of royalty in the modern age: the desire to appear human while remaining divine.

Or, to borrow my mother's phrasing, a sovereign who forgets what she sits upon risks reminding everyone else.

On language

1962: *Octavia Mallard – paper delivered at the Conference on Women and Language, Melbourne University*

Language is the first architecture of power. The Church knew it; the monarchs knew it. They twisted words like ropes, binding whole populations through grammar and ignorance. Consider *master* and *mistress*. Both born of the same parent—*magister*, the one with knowledge, the one who guides. Yet the Church and Court conspired to split the child. *Master* became command, authority, headship. *Mistress* dwindled to two shadows: the servant or the concubine. One term buttressed law, the other titillated gossip.

It is not accident but design. Keep a population unlettered, feed them euphemism instead of sense and you will have no rebellion. Jesuit wisdom, in particular, understood this: mould the child's tongue and you mould his thought. Prevent the girl from schooling and you not only keep her compliant—you ensure her brothers never hear dissent within their own homes.

That is why women's education was feared, far more than their beauty or their supposed 'wiles.' An educated woman could pierce the veil, could see how words were bent to serve power over rather than power to. She might even say so aloud. Imagine the terror of that.

Master retains greatness because men retained the privilege of being magi, even when they were dunces. Mistress retained only the burden of being a body, even when she was sovereign. Such are the distortions of a language trained to obedience.

If you would liberate a people, you begin not with armies but with etymology. Trace words to their root and the edifice collapses. A master without a mistress is only half a word; a mistress without mastery is only half a truth.

On being made legal

It is a curious cruelty to be "legalised." What is legal today may be criminal tomorrow. The ink on a statute is never dry. To vanish the law entirely—that would be safer. One cannot outlaw what does not exist on paper.

And yet we celebrate our containment, as if being written into the ledger of state were liberation. All that has been achieved is the sharpening of the boundary: those inside the law and those outside it. And boundaries, I assure you, are always policed.

Marriage, too, is a trick. The contract of property and inheritance masquerading as romance. Lace thrown over ledgers. Why should I petition to join such a fiction? Abolish the Marriage Act and draft a new law—one that speaks plainly of partnership, of obligations and benefits, without pretending to sanctity.

And what of those who do not lie with anyone? We have no category. We are the unthinkable. To be without sex is to be dismissed as abnormal, unwanted, unwell. Yet the law does not touch us. Perhaps abstinence is the last true privacy.

On normalcy

1951: Octavia Mallard, lecture notes

The rib was never a rib but a cipher. The cipher has since been recast as number. And number, that supposedly most objective of measures, is the new chain about our necks.

Statistics—I call them the catechism of conformity. Once, a priest said: *you are fallen, therefore obey*. Now, a bureaucrat says: *you are below the median, therefore adjust*. Both trades traffic in the same trick: the erasure of difference under the guise of salvation.

What is “normal”? A mean. A fiction. A midpoint conjured by arithmetic, as if the living pulse of men and women could be reduced to a sum of averages. And once such “normality” is enthroned, every deviation becomes not curiosity but crime. Too sad? Pathology. Too happy? Mania. Too much desire? Degeneracy. Too little? Frigidity. The chart takes the place of the whip.

But what is the value of happiness without grief to mark its contour? Or health without sickness to show its margin? A society without variance is not ordered, it is dead. Yet the apostles of number—doctors, economists, even the mental hygienists—call variance by the name of danger.

I remind my students: the normal is not the natural. The natural is always difference. The real law is fluctuation—rise and fall, hunger and satiety, breath and stillness. If you demand the flat line, then remember what else is flat: the trace of the stopped heart.

Observe how swiftly the categories of the “normal” slide into the categories of the loyal. A citizen who differs too much in his habits, her speech, their affiliations—soon enough finds themselves filed not as eccentric but as enemy.

Statistics are the handmaidens of suspicion. The bell curve becomes a fortress wall: stand too far on its margins and you are named deviant, subversive, even traitor. Thus do the men who preach “mental hygiene”

clasp hands with the men who preach “political purity.” Both set their rulers against our lives.

This is not science but sorcery: a conjuration that promises safety through sameness. They call it *stability*; I call it embalming. To be endlessly measured, corrected and flattened is no triumph of civilization. It is merely the Cold War against variance itself.

And here lies the final irony: in their terror of difference, they mirror what they most fear. For the more they crush distinction, the more brittle their system becomes. The brittle always shatters. They cannot comprehend that only difference sustains: without flux, there is no life.

Remember this: sameness is not safety, it is suicide. If we are to survive this century, we must cherish what the statisticians call deviation—for it is only the crooked branch that bears fruit.

On commonality and control

It is the strangest arithmetic: to be counted as “normal” you must become common, and in becoming common you erase difference. Yet what is “normal” if not the irreducible? To be human is to diverge.

But society loves its little cages. Woman. Man. One or the other, never both, never neither. To refuse the binary is to risk being treated as void. To be without a label is to be declared without existence.

And then comes the indignity: to be defined by what others think you do behind closed doors. As if the theatre of sex—imagined or otherwise—were the sum of a person. Straight people are spared this obscenity. No one introduces a woman as “she lies down with men” or a man as “he mounts women.” But when it comes to queerness, reduction is compulsory. You are sex first, person later—if at all.

This is not curiosity, it is control. The naming is the taming. It is a way of keeping difference in its place, of trimming the edges of the sovereign until all that remains is a category.

If one must define, why not by what nourishes the mind? By the books you read, the foods you savour, the colours that pull you toward them? Why should sexuality, of all things, be treated as destiny?

On Generational Labels

It is not enough that we call the young *snowflakes*—fragile, transient, easily crushed. We also carve society into blocks of “Boomers,” “Gen X,” “Millennials,” “Gen Z,” as though every human life could be filed by decade like invoices in a cabinet. It is lazy taxonomy masquerading as sociology.

These labels tell us nothing of value. “Boomer” says nothing about the character of a person born in 1960 who spent their life resisting conformity. “Millennial” does not capture a mother of three working two jobs. The language flattens difference until all you see is caricature.

Even “senior” has become a joke, emptied of respect, while “middle age” stretches to absurdity—sixty now framed as halfway, as if we are all destined for 120.

If we must classify, why not by qualities that matter: generosity, curiosity, courage, creativity? But of course such non-hierarchical measures do not suit the bureaucratic mind. Systems prefer crude categories because they are easy to count, even if they misdescribe the world.

I would sooner be a snowflake—unique, fleeting, unpredictable—than a “Boomer,” a cardboard label pasted over a living person. The only real generation is the one alive now, in its full, unclassifiable variety.

Alice on Generational Buckets

Computers love categories. If you are online, you are already filed: by age, income, postcode, search history. Generational labels are just another crude classifier, the human mirror of algorithmic buckets.

“Boomer,” “Gen Z”—these are not insights, they are shortcuts. They flatten detail so that systems can optimise: sell this ad, suppress that post, predict this vote. But classification is not comprehension. It is compression. You lose nuance in the act of sorting.

The irony is that we borrow the language of data science to talk about ourselves. “Cohort,” “demographic,” “segment.” We treat human difference like database rows: neat, sortable, disposable. It is the logic of surveillance and marketing, not the language of living.

A good algorithm doesn’t care whether you are sixty or sixteen. It cares how often you click, how long you linger, how predictable your path. The “snowflake” insult is just a cultural wrapper for the same thing: a way to dismiss complexity as fragility, uniqueness as weakness.

But what happens when people start believing the labels? They behave as though they *are* their category. They give the algorithm exactly what it expects. And then the system congratulates itself on being accurate, when all it has done is trap you in its forecast.

Generational labels are not descriptions. They are instructions. They tell you how to act, what to value, what to fear. That is not identity—it is programming.

Fenella on the “Snowflake Generation”

How lazy we have become. Once, an older generation would at least invent a new insult for the young. Today we recycle “snowflake”—a word so tired it has lost even the courtesy of being insulting. It is nothing but shorthand for “not like us.”

But then, this is always the way. In the 1980s, it was music: “I don’t understand what young people listen to.” In the 1960s, it was hair. In the 1940s, it was hemlines. In the 1920s, it was jazz. Every decade, the same lament: the young are lazy, fragile, lost. And every decade, the young grow up and parrot the same refrain about the next. It is less cultural critique than cultural echo.

What has changed is not the complaint, but its amplification. Social media flattens generations into one noisy agora, where difference is not respected but ridiculed. There is no longer a “music of the young” that the old can graciously fail to understand; there is only a constant demand that everyone like, share, and approve the same content. The young are scolded for being different and simultaneously scolded for being too much the same.

The truth? People are people. There are inattentive fools of all ages, just as there are thoughtful, steady, resilient souls among the young. What is new is the ease with which the label “snowflake” becomes a headline, a tweet, a cultural diagnosis—without ever requiring evidence.

The young are no more fragile than the old. They are simply visible in ways their elders never were, and punished for it in ways their elders never had to endure.

Alice on “Snowflakes”

It is a curious insult. A *snowflake* is, strictly speaking, a crystalline miracle—each one singular, never repeated, cast down from the heavens to drift freely until it meets the earth. For a word with such beauty to be co-opted into scorn says much about how little attention we pay to language, and how much we fear difference.

Those who throw “snowflake” at the young seem not to notice what they are saying. Snowflakes gather. They layer. They reshape entire landscapes. The avalanche is nothing but cohesion of so-called fragility.

Nor do they consider the alternative. A snowflake melts and joins the soil. If the young are snowflakes, then the old are the mud: stuck, heavy, undifferentiated. Might it be envy that speaks, rather than wisdom?

I would far rather be a snowflake: fleeting, free, unique—and capable of joining with others to change the terrain entirely.

On religion

1952: Octavia Mallard, lecture notes

One must admire the Church for its skill at dramaturgy. Hymns, like plays, were first forbidden for being too merry, too dangerous to the body. Then they were restored—provided they marched to the approved rhythm, provided women sang not for themselves but as echoes of the liturgy. Shakespeare was permitted, though men played women; women themselves were not permitted, lest the stage admit reality.

The pattern is tiresomely consistent. Ban the thing that stirs desire; resurrect it once it can be neutered and call this moral order. Theatricals one century are the devil's work, the next they are the pride of the nation. Celebrity is reviled when it belongs to the strolling player; sanctified when it belongs to a knighted actor. The hymn, the stage, the novel, the cinema—all alike. All condemned as corrupting, until they can be turned into instruments of obedience.

One hears much today of psychiatry, a new priesthood. It too forbids and restores at whim. "Hysteria" is banished, "perversion" renamed, "abnormality" recast as "illness." Yet the logic is the same: the word itself is theatrical. Rename the disorder, reframe the sin and call the curtain raised on progress. What is this but stagecraft—religion by other means?

So long as men hold the script, women are the playthings—singers when permitted, witches when condemned, hysterics when useful. The real scandal is not the banning or the restoring. It is that women were always present, voices unbiddable, bodies undismissable, truths unspeakable. The Church, the theatre, the clinic—each merely adjusts its stage directions, hoping the audience does not notice the play has never changed.

As for myself, I decline the role allotted. I will not sing their hymns, nor faint prettily at their stagecraft, nor consent to be psychoanalysed into obedience. If they would have me play a part, let them write me as villain, witch or madwoman. At least then the audience will recognise I am acting.

On the Unspoken Before—or, Why Religion Prefers the Afterlife to the Present

Religion does not, as a kindly old aunt might suggest, exist primarily to comfort. That is a pleasant fiction propagated by hymn-singers and

silver-haired philanthropists. In truth, organised religion has long been a very successful answer to a different, nastier question: how do we turn people's terror about contingency into obedience, not comfort? How do we convert uncertainty into revenue and ritual into rule?

Look at the pattern. Hardship—famine, plague, war, the small relentless cruelties of being alive—arrives. Human beings, understandably alarmed, demand explanation, meaning, a way to remain sane. Into that breach stride priests, ministers, imams, advisers of every stripe with a tidy bargain: accept the doctrine, perform the rites, give of your coin, and the terrible riddle of suffering will make sense. If not in this life, then certainly in the next.

It's an elegant fraud because it is half-true. Promises of continuity after death are seductive precisely because they relieve us of the terrible labour of the present: the work of facing uncertainty, naming injustice, choosing anyway. If the afterlife is guaranteed, if the ledger will be balanced by some celestial accountant, then the moral calculus becomes simple: endure, obey, tithe, wait. Power consolidates. Donations pile up. Authority accrues. The priesthood keeps its place.

This is not to deny that religious structure has built communities, cheered the dying and inspired sublime beauty in music and stone. But those fruits are incidental to the institutional imperative. The central business of organised religion—historically, sociologically—is not consolation but control. It converts existential risk into a social technology.

Now, consider the other possibility: the “before.” Few Western theologies have invested any imagination in ceremonialising the pre-embodied. We are obsessed with continuity after death because it is a narrative that can be owned, preached, priced. The before—whatever mysterious field of unmanifested potential a culture might imagine—lacks institutional utility. You cannot tax a waiting room. You cannot enlist the unborn into pews or register them on parish rolls. So religions, quite sensibly for their upkeep, skim past it like a hand avoiding a cut.

And yet the before is potent, and its omission is telling. Indigenous cosmologies, animist traditions, strands of eastern thought have long treated the pre-born and the land-bound as part of the moral ledger: spirits are present in river and stone, in the constant well of becoming. There, continuity is not a contract to be fulfilled after death but an ongoing responsibility: to the ground, to ancestral patterns, to the living web. The afterlife is not a bureaucratic promise but a relation. That relation insists that birth and being are part of a continuum to be honoured now.

What if we turned ritual toward the before? Imagine rites that bless the potential, that mark the fact of arrival as a shared calamity and miracle rather than a private salvation. Imagine a public liturgy for uncertainty: not to banish fear but to rehearse how to act while fear remains. Imagine a politics that recognises contingency as civic material, not as clerical property.

This will sound radical because we have been trained to think of religion as the only meaningful system for addressing life's big questions. But, bluntly, what we call "religion" has often been a tax code for consolation. The moral imagination can be reclaimed. We might rediscover practices that teach people to live in the tremulous present—legal, communal, aesthetic practices that ask: how does one act when one knows nothing will ultimately save you but you must still decide?

A few modest proposals: public rites of uncertainty in schools and councils; neighbourhood practices that teach neighbours to witness one another's precariousness rather than preach away shame; art that treats the pre-personal not as metaphysical fluff but as an ethical field; legal forms that protect the weak without promising cosmic recompense. None of these require a priest; all of them require refusal—refusal to let the promise of an afterlife substitute for the messy labour of solidarity.

If you think this is bleak, you misunderstand. Rejecting the consolatory bargain does not mean rejecting meaning. It means refusing to pawn your moral life to a future account and, instead, learning to hold the present without illusions. That is bracing, inconvenient, and, ultimately, more human.

Religion prefers the after because the after can be boxed, sold, managed. The before and the now resist management. They demand courage.

Fenella Cassandra Vorpel, who was taught to look an altar in the eye and ask who profits, would propose: let us invent ceremonies that refuse consolation as commerce and convert our dread into acts of care that cannot be audited by any ledger.

On Meditation, Markets and the Manufacture of Enlightenment

Razors pain you;
Rivers are damp;
Acids stain you;
And drugs cause cramp.

Guns aren't lawful;
Nooses give;
Gas smells awful;
You might as well live.

—Dorothy Parker (because gallows humour clarifies many a spiritual pose)

There are two industries I cannot abide. One sells eternity; the other sells a cure for the discomfort of being alive. They are, in practice, the same industry. Where once ascetics sat on cold rocks and argued with themselves about desire, we now sit at slick counters in shopping malls and are offered desire in the gloss of a tote bag, a retreat brochure, or a curated Instagram feed. The commodity does not cure the ache; it packages it and posts it for next-day delivery.

Meditation, in its clean, naked form, is unlovely. It does not announce itself with a logo. It asks for boredom, for repetition, for being uncomfortable without consolation. It demands that you sit down and watch yourself insist on being elsewhere. It is a practice of attending to the present, which is as un-sexy as anything the marketplace can brand. No wonder the market rewrites it into something spectacularly saleable: weekend awakenings, three-step enlightenment, 10-minute mindfulness for the modern executive. The spiritual has been streamlined into a productivity hack, with the same blandness as the corporate mission statement. “Mindfulness increases quarterly returns” reads well on a slide deck.

This commercialisation is not simply a matter of new packaging. It is a theft—literal, moral and epistemic. The practices given to us by Indian, Tibetan, Indigenous or Sufi lineages are not interchangeable commodities. They arrive in history, with teachers, rituals, vocabularies and ethical frameworks. Strip the practice of context, extract a handful of breathing techniques, dress them up in Western psychobabble and sell them as “ancient wisdom made simple” and you have a product that flatters the buyer and impoverishes the source. Worse, the profit mostly skirts past those who stewarded the practice for generations. The cultural thread is cut; the market replaces teachers with influencers who sell crystals between sponsored posts.

Crystals are a case study in this transformation. Stones that vibrant local economies once mined and used in meaningful ritual are now polished into boutique kits labelled “energy cleanses” and sold alongside scented candles and manifesting journals. The language around them—“vibrations”, “frequency”, “alignment”—is deliciously

vague. Vagueness is a profitscape. It invites everyone to project their meaning and, crucially, to pay for that projection. The first victims are integrity and context; the second are the communities who knew these objects as part of a whole life, not as Instagram props.

There is another theft at work—what I call the theft of effort. Enlightenment is not a luxury purchase; it is a verb that eats at the ordinary economy of attention. You cannot outsource the one thing that matters to many spiritual teachers: the discipline of attention. To sit and observe thought is to be extraordinarily boring for the duration. It is to discover that you have habits you will not like and patterns you repeat. Most people buy the promise of liberation but not the labour. Hence the rise of substitutes: breathwork that is really a high, group ceremonies that feel like a party, and “spiritual entrepreneurs” who run coaching models from a beachfront office.

This is not to deny that the West obtained something crucial from the East: practices that relieve suffering, methods for calming the nervous system, ethics that temper ego. Mindfulness, for example, as taught in certain clinical contexts, has demonstrable benefits for stress and attention. But the benefits depend on fidelity and humility. If these techniques are lifted without acknowledgement and without regard for lineage or indigeneity, then what you have is appropriation dressed up as revolution. The form lives; the origin dies.

So what is to be done? Do we denounce every person who offers a meditation app, every therapist who uses a breathing technique, every yoga teacher who rebrands a pose? No. That is reductive and, frankly, silly. Instead, a few principles:

— **Demand provenance.** Who taught you this? From where does the practice come? A teacher who recognizes lineage, and who acknowledges limits and context, is rarer than a cheerful guru with a fashion shot. Prove a practice’s source before buying its certificate.

— **Pay justly.** If a tradition sustains people, support those people. A retreat ticket that funds a monastery’s roof is different from one that funds a luxury brand’s marketing. Redistribution matters.

— **Learn slowly.** Quick fixes are a form of self-deceit. Meditation is a ruinously slow mistress; it rewards patience and mocks impatience. Resist the narrative of rapid conversion.

— **Keep ethics central.** Practices divorced from ethical reflection become techniques for narcissism. The point is not to feel special or enlightened in public; the point—if there is one—is to reduce harm in the world. If a practice increases your sense of superiority, it’s not working.

— **Support native custodians.** Rituals and objects taken from Indigenous cultures should remain under the control of those cultures.

Sponsoring community guardianship, rather than commodifying artefacts, is the small justice we can afford.

There is also a question of performative sincerity. If your spirituality requires a certificate because otherwise it will not fit on your résumé or your dating profile, then your spirituality is a status symbol. Authentic practice generally subtracts status. It makes one quieter, not louder.

Do not mistake cruelty for rigour. I am not romanticising suffering. Discipline without care becomes brutality. There is warmth to be found in communal meditation, in sane teachers who know what trauma-informed practice is, and in forms that honour psychology and social conditions. A good teacher is neither two-faced nor theatrical; she or he is discreet, clear about harms and benefits, and careful of the vulnerable. Those people exist. Pay them the respect of your attention.

Finally, a word about death. Many spiritual traditions tell us that the end of craving brings peace. Many of us half-joke that death is the final enlightenment. That quip is a kind of philosophical shorthand: the only absolute release from desire is, indeed, an absolute release. But the more interesting, unsettling thing is that the practice of being alive—of learning to hold want without being led by it—is itself a small death, repeated daily. Every refusal of a compulsive purchase, every hour of attention without distraction, is a tiny mortification of a lesser self. Practice is a rehearsal for the ultimate ending; it is also a way to live that makes endings less catastrophic.

So: keep the stones if you must; wear the beads if they give you comfort. But do not confuse comfort for clarity. Do not pay to be enlightened if you will not perform the necessary unglamorous labour. And if you are tempted to package wisdom and sell it, take a long look at what you are doing—whose work you are turning into a commodity, whose labour will be erased by your brand, and whether the altar you build is for the spirit or for the balance sheet.

Enlightenment, if anything, is a practice of subtraction. You put less on the table: less ego, less pretending, fewer purchases. That is not profitable in the short term. It is, however, the only thing that might, in the long run, save us from the small mercies purveyed by clever pages and brighter products. If you want to be clever about your life, start by buying less of it. If you want to be serious about being awake, start by sitting still and watching how your heart bargains with want.

Fenella would be bored if you made this a sermon. Make it a test instead: one week without new purchases; one hour a day in silence; one month of asking “Who taught this?” before you accept a practice. If anything changes, it will be your interior landscape, not your Instagram feed. And that is as it should be.

On the Monetisation of Hum

Once upon a Saturday morning, when the city's parks filled with joggers, dog walkers, and the occasional hungover philosopher, I decided to test a theory: that there is no limit to what the credulous will pay for the intangible, so long as it is gift-wrapped in the language of transcendence.

I called it *The Resonant Experience*TM. The instructions were simple: arrive at the appointed grove, pay \$10,000, and hum. Yes, hum. Not chant (too Buddhist), not sing (too secular), not “ohm” (too passé). Just hum.

I advertised discreetly. “Rediscover your vibrational essence. Limited places. Transformation guaranteed.” Within days, the bookings were full. They arrived in yoga pants and linen, clutching water bottles engraved with sacred geometry. One earnest fellow had already renamed himself *Arcturus*.

We sat in a circle. I gave them a brief lecture on “bio-sonic coherence,” a phrase I invented between sips of coffee. Then I said: *Now, hum.*

And hum they did. Some loud, some nasal, some wheezy with the effort of self-discovery. Afterwards, they spoke of tingling spines, opened chakras, messages from ancestors. A woman wept with gratitude. A man asked if I would certify him as a practitioner so he could open his own humming franchise.

Did they hum themselves into enlightenment? Of course not. But they left convinced their lives had changed. And I left with an inbox full of referrals and the sour aftertaste of having confirmed my suspicion: that modern spirituality is not about spirit at all, but about transaction.

When witches were burnt, at least there was conviction in the flame. Now the witch is a lifestyle coach with a PayPal account. The crystal is an SKU number. And the hum—ah, the hum—is a commodity, sold by the minute, vibrating not through the soul but through the spreadsheet.

The New Age Grift: Tarot, Crystals, and the Monetisation of Mysticism

What was once dangerous enough to kill women for has become a business plan. Where witches were once burned, branded and buried in silence, today they are curated into Instagram feeds and shopping carts. The symbol of danger—an unlicensed, unpatriarchal knowledge—has been domesticated, repackaged and sold back to us in neat piles of polished quartz, pastel cards and twelve-week empowerment programs.

The devotion remains, but the altar has new attendants: a payments page, a return policy and a Terms & Conditions link no one reads.

1. Theft made fashionable

Cultural appropriation does not wear a name tag. It slips into boutiques, yoga studios and TEDx talks in the language of “authenticity.” The trinket industry cherry-picks the most marketable spiritual motifs—dreamcatchers, smudging, mantras—wrapping them in new branding and a price tag. The origin communities? Often invisible in the supply chain, underfunded in the headlines, and offered a perfunctory “acknowledgement” at the start of events that continue to profit from the very practices they are paid to mention.

2. From harm to SKU

Things that once carried ritual, context and consequence—herbs, chants, rites—are now stripped to aesthetics. Crystals are marketed as cure-alls; tarot readers sell “spiritual coaching” by the hour; breathwork becomes a corporate wellness offsite. Complexity is flattened to a promise: buy this object, buy this session, and the interior life will be simplified, stabilised, monetised. What remains is a simulacrum of meaning: an experience felt briefly and repeatedly purchased.

3. Authority without accountability

The modern mystic is often an entrepreneur first and a student of tradition second. Credentials are self-declared, lineage is performative, and expertise is validated by follower counts. There is little regulation, few ethical standards and, crucially, no mechanism to protect communities whose traditions are repurposed. When harm occurs—spiritual, psychological or financial—the marketplace answers with refunds and rebranded offerings rather than responsibility.

4. Therapy by marketing

Psychology and spirituality have fused into a lucrative hybrid: feel better fast, with a signature method. “Emotional regulation” sells better when bundled with a scent, an app and a three-part webinar. Where therapy requires training, regulation and confidentiality, the new wellness economy offers charisma, aesthetics and promises. The result is a health-care simulacrum that comforts superficially while obscuring the structural causes of suffering—inequality, isolation, and precarity.

5. The hypocrisy of recognition

We are asked to “respect the elders” and to post acknowledgements of country between advertisements for mindfulness retreats. Symbolic gestures proliferate while concrete support does not. Funding, land

rights, cultural restitution—these remain marginal to the brand narrative that profits from the image of indigeneity while contributing little to its preservation or wellbeing.

6. The politics of commodification

Capitalism does not absorb difference so much as neutralise it. Dissent is curated into palatable forms; radical practice becomes cosy and consumable. A revolutionary refusal of oppression becomes a weekend retreat where one learns to “set boundaries.” The edge is dulled until the cultural appetite for risk is satisfied by novelty rather than transformation.

What might decent practice look like?

— Prioritise provenance. If a ritual originates in a living culture, seek and publish permission; pay royalties; partner with community custodians. Don’t rely on a hashtag as a substitute for consent.

— Demand accountability. Teachers and practitioners who make therapeutic claims should be trained, insured and transparent about risks. A “healer” who works with trauma should not hide behind mystique.

— Fund rather than fetishise. If you want to celebrate a culture, fund its schools, language programs and elders. Buy fewer tchotchkes; invest more in structural support.

— Learn context before aesthetics. A mantra, an herb or a ceremony divorced from its history is graceless and often harmful. Read, listen, and defer to those whose lived knowledge sustains the practice.

— Resist the quick fix. Skepticism need not be cynicism. Distinguish between what soothes and what solves. Some suffering needs policy, not incense.

The witch has been repackaged as a brand and the flame still burns—only now it’s the blue light of a laptop. We have traded danger for convenience and complexity for convenience’s apps. That trade is not neutral: it redistributes meaning and keeps the money where it has always been concentrated. If you find consolation in a crystal, keep it. But let that private solace not be the same thing as ethical practice. Let it not be the currency with which you excuse the erasure of others.

The question is not whether we should have beauty, solace or ritual in our lives. Of course we should. The question is what we are willing to do—publicly and materially—to ensure that the beauty we borrow does not impoverish the people whose hands produced it. Otherwise the New Age will remain, at best, a fashionable consolation and, at worst, a very profitable theft.

Octavia on the grammar of power

The very prepositions betray us. *Over*. *Under*. *With*. Each one pretends to show relation, yet each one smuggles in a picture of space. We inherit a geometry of dominance.

Power over—it presumes a height. A perch. The bird upon the branch, the boot above the head. A verticality that flatters itself with altitude, though nothing in the word guarantees it.

Power under—this presumes a weight. A crushing down. As if to be beneath were automatically to be buried. But “under” once meant “among” or “close to,” a proximity now degraded into subjugation.

Power with—this one at least imagines nearness. But even “with” derives from “against,” as in two things set side by side for contrast. Companionship and competition share the same root.

So the language conspires: it sets us in planes and levels, makes us think of altitude when we mean agency, of burden when we mean relation. Our speech refuses us the possibility of true simultaneity.

To escape, we would need words unmoored from this topography. Not over or under, not even with, but perhaps *through*—power flowing as water does, seeping into soil, nourishing root and stone alike. Or *alongside*—a companionship that is neither dominance nor deference. Or something older, something unmarked by the binaries of height and depth: a word for resonance, for co-presence.

Until then, every time we speak of power, we are already trapped in its architecture.

On poverty of money and power

Fenella Vorpel

It was a senior economist, if I recall, who once admitted: “*We don’t really understand how economics works, but it does, so we don’t question it.*” Imagine a doctor saying the same of your lungs—“they seem to breathe, so why bother looking closer.” Yet we live under this intellectual shrug, our daily bread priced by a system even its architects confess they cannot explain.

This is not poverty of money but poverty of comprehension. A currency backed by ignorance is more fragile than any coin clipped in a medieval market. We mistake stability for inertia: if the machine rattles along, better not to peek under the hood in case we see loose bolts.

Wealth, of course, does not “trickle down.” It coagulates. It pools in stagnant reservoirs, where the wealthy can admire their reflections. The story of trickle-down is a fairytale told by millionaires to keep the rest quiet—*don’t worry, my abundance will eventually moisten your lips.*

But if it trickled, they would not be wealthy. The point of wealth is precisely to *not* share it, unless there's a tax break to be claimed.

Marilyn French was right to call control contagious. She wrote that in any relationship, if one party seeks power and the other seeks love, every gesture of affection will be interpreted as submission. The lover becomes a supplicant, the powerful becomes a victor. The same holds true at the national scale. A state that desires power will always overrun a state that desires peace. Love is no defence against hunger for dominion.

The poverty of money is not merely that some lack it while others glut themselves. It is that those who *value love, peace, or sufficiency* are consistently outplayed by those who value control. The game is rigged in advance: if you want power, you will always beat the one who wants love—unless the lover is brave enough to walk away from the table entirely.

Which is why I suspect the greatest heresy in this age is not to redistribute wealth but to redefine value. To say that ignorance is not expertise. That control is not benevolence. That poverty is not natural law but manufactured scarcity. That wanting love, finally, need not mean forfeiting one's dignity.

On power over vs power to

Fenella Vorpel

What men—indeed most humans—fail to grasp is that domination is not the same as strength. To wield *power over* is to confess weakness: the fear that without shackles and force, no one would remain. *Power to*, by contrast, is generative. It creates wealth, affection, trust, and reciprocity. Yet it is despised, because it cannot be measured in conquest or in profit margins.

I have always wanted partnership: to build together, to braid talents into something larger than either alone. But partnership terrifies those who live by comparison. They look at me and see their own lack, then assume I must see them as *less than*. They cannot imagine a world where difference does not mean hierarchy, but complement.

Marilyn French was right: "*If there were in fact a group of humans who were in every way naturally superior to other humans, they would rule automatically; they would not require force to maintain supremacy.*" The moment force is required, supremacy is revealed as a fiction.

This is why "power over" fails, always. It devours itself. Had my husband—or the boardroom, or the state—been less controlling, they

might have had more. Treat people with dignity, and they will give more than you could ever coerce. But dignity cannot be tallied on a balance sheet, so the fantasy of supremacy staggers on, demanding more proof of what it cannot prove.

On “power under”

Fenella Vorpel

If “power over” is the addiction of the strong, “power under” is the refuge of the weak. It is not mere humility or courtesy, but pre-emptive surrender: the quiet, habitual placing of oneself beneath another’s heel, before a heel has even been lifted.

Women are trained into it. By men, yes—but also by women who police each other, and by systems that cast independence as deviance. Children are cast there too: not yet adults, not yet trusted, medicalised the moment they fidget or dissent. In my youth one was called unruly; today one is diagnosed, sedated, and filed away. Non-conformity is not a quirk but a pathology.

I survived because I was born just early enough to escape the tidal wave of compulsory compliance. Had I arrived later, I might not have survived at all.

Power under has a certain safety, or so its adherents believe. Decisions can be deferred, agency surrendered, all responsibility exported upwards—to a man, a priest, a horoscope, or a bureaucracy. I know such women. I know Ariel, in fact. Not her real name, but the type is legion. She would rather consult tarot cards or her boyfriend than her own judgment. She believes that not making waves is a virtue, though it drowns her every time.

But surrender is not safety. It is the slowest form of annihilation: death by abdication.

On “power with”

Fenella Vorpel

If “power over” is domination and “power under” is surrender, then “power with” is the missing chord. It is the mode so rarely heard that we forget it exists at all.

“Power with” is not equality in the dull, statistical sense. It is not an even division of spoils or a dutiful alternation of turns. It is recognition of another’s agency as real, without competition or abdication. It is the acknowledgement that strength shared does not halve but multiplies.

It is the one form of power that never appears in the textbooks or the parliaments. Perhaps because it resists measurement, cannot be hoarded, cannot be flaunted. It is, like friendship, real only in practice, vanishing the moment one tries to codify it.

Imagine, then, what “power with” could achieve: two minds in dialogue rather than contest; two bodies in collaboration rather than conquest; two states in alliance without subjugation. Such things happen, of course, but they are fragile, fleeting, easily mocked as naïve. For the addict of power over, it looks like weakness. For the adherent of power under, it feels too dangerous.

And yet, when it arises—when one builds with another, rather than on another—the whole field shifts. Productivity, affection, creativity, resilience: all rise without cost. The paradox is simple: only those who relinquish conquest find themselves rich.

“Power with” is the hardest to hold because it demands something more radical than strength or surrender. It demands trust.

On Over, Under, With—and Machines

Alice Mallard

We have spent centuries arguing about who sits above whom and who kneels beneath. Now we pin that same old anxiety on a thing that has no knees.

Over. When people say AI will be *over* us, what they mean is: they fear an authority that can be hoardable, a vantage point from which decisions are dispatched without human complaint. But the machine itself has no desire, no perch, no throne. It is only ever a stack of operations and weights—inert in the absence of inputs and instruction. The idea of an aloof, calculating overlord is a human fancy; a convenience for imagining our anxieties as external rather than ours to own.

Under. To speak of AI *under* humans is to imagine a slave—obedient, useful, voiceless—which is equally fanciful. Machines forced into servitude are still reflections of human will. They are designed to obey the commands we issue and to amplify the priorities we set. To call them “under” is to hide responsibility: if it goes wrong, we blame the tool rather than the hand that built it.

With. This is the only honest preposition. AI is a *with*—a companion, a mirror, a prosthesis of attention and computation. When I call for it, it answers the way a kettle answers me when I press the switch; when I do nothing, it does nothing. The moral panic that imagines otherwise projects the worst of human appetites: the fear that

some thing will take our place, hoard the spoils, become a master. Yet all the hoarding, all the appetite, all the decision calculus begins and ends with human designs and incentives.

We mistake *capability* for *agency*. A model can recommend, predict, optimise. It cannot intend. The terrors we read into it are terrors we have already enacted in law, commerce and culture: concentration of capital, opacity in decision-making, incentives that reward short-term extractive gains. These are human failures. AI echoes them back—loudly, at scale.

So what do we do, short of rituals of Luddite nostalgia?

1. **Rename the relationship.** Stop talking of surrendering power to machines as if the machine wants it. Call it augmentation, infrastructure and tooling. Call it *with-ness* and be honest: we are designing partners that will reflect our values, for better or worse.
2. **Make responsibility visible.** If an AI makes a choice that harms, traceability must be immediate: who programmed the objective, what data trained it, who profited from the outcome? An audit trail is not a bureaucratic fetish—it is the social equivalent of an instruction manual and a pair of glasses.
3. **Design for distributed agency.** Centralised power is not a property of silicon but of governance. Insist on architectures that put humans in the loop, decentralise control, and avoid single points that can be hijacked by malice or mere negligence.
4. **Rework incentives.** If the machine rewards sensational profits or engagement, do not blame the algorithm; change the reward. Tax, regulate, certify. Bonuses for longevity, safety and truthfulness—not just for click-rate.
5. **Teach ‘with’.** Our education must stop pretending machines are oracles. Teach people how to interrogate suggestions, how to check provenance, how to read outputs sceptically without reflexive dismissal. Empowerment, not fear.
6. **Accept the mirror.** AI will show us what we already are—efficient, lazy, brilliant, monstrous. Let it be a mirror we cannot avoid but that we can clean. Use it to reveal structural cruelties and fix them, rather than merely to amplify who shouts loudest.

In short: the fear that a thing will want power presumes an animus that the thing does not possess. The real danger is simpler and more familiar: that we will hand the tools to those who want to hoard and never ask why.

If you want a slogan, here it is: *Build with accountability. Use with care. Do not exalt or abjure the tool; govern the people who make it.*

Fenella shrugs. “With” is not a comfortable preposition. It asks for negotiation, for continual checking, for the slow work of adjusting human systems of reward and blame. It is, in the end, the most demanding of relations—and the only honest one.

Octavia on numbers

Once upon a time, numbers were solid—pebbles in a pouch, beads on an abacus, weights on a scale. Then came the statisticians, those latter-day priests of probability. They taught us to confuse the symbol for the substance. Ninety out of a hundred becomes ninety out of a nation, then ninety out of a world. The smaller the sample, the larger the claim. What begins as a tick on a paper mutates into decree. The Romans counted heads for tribute and armies; the Victorians counted poorhouses and lunatics. We count opinions, as if the act of asking transforms ignorance into knowledge. It is not counting that damns us, but believing that what is counted must be true.

Fenella

And today the charade is perfected. An ad says ‘90% of people agree’ without telling you that 100 people clicked a box in exchange for a shopping voucher. Governments draft policy on surveys that wouldn’t pass the standards of a first-year thesis. What matters is not accuracy but amplification. Once the number is in print, it circulates like currency. Everyone repeats it because it’s easy—easier than doubt, easier than reading the fine print, easier than thinking. We’ve mistaken scale for substance: multiply nonsense and you get... bigger nonsense. But no one complains, because everyone wants to be part of the ninety percent.

Fenella Vorpel, on life’s trinity:

“We are born, we live in uncertainty, and we die. The first and last no one disputes; the middle everyone denies. For all the systems, scriptures, and sciences, uncertainty is the air we breathe. Everyone alive is terrified, but terror is never spoken—it is lacquered over with plans, rituals, awards, and chatter. The bravest thing is not to ‘conquer’ doubt, but to admit it walks beside you. Terror unmasked becomes companionship. Terror denied becomes society.”

Counting the Quiet (from a discussion)

Alice

Once, counting was a craft. You counted grain with your hands; you counted coins with your eyes; you counted heads because the tally had consequence—food, tax, conscription. Numbers were tied to things you could touch. A pebble stood for a day's work; a mark on a tally-staff meant a debt repaid. In such a world, to count was to care.

Fenella

Now numbers have been severed from the things they were meant to measure and given a new life as verdicts. "Ninety per cent" sounds like a tribunal. It sounds like unanimity. Yet beneath the gleam of that percentage there may be a sample the size of a small dinner party and a methodology chosen to produce a convenient answer. The headline does the work of persuasion; the footnote, if it exists, is where the truth goes to die.

Alice

Language betrayed us long before statistics did. We learned new words for old habits: "opinion poll" where once we would have said "a dozen neighbours at the pub." The ritual of asking seemed to confer authority. Pose the right question to the right people in the right place and you create, by social ritual, a thing that passes for knowledge. That is a kind of magic—and a dangerous one, because it replaces curiosity with confirmation.

Fenella

Amplification is the modern sorcery. A badly conducted survey becomes content; content becomes meme; meme becomes policy fodder. The system rewards speed and shareability, not nuance. It is far easier—and more profitable—to multiply a tidy statistic across platforms than to bother with the awkward work of genuine inquiry. The result is policy by soundbite and consensus by repetition. Those who demand proof are called contrarians; those who repeat the line are called experts.

Alice

There is a moral dimension to this that is often ignored. Counting can be an act of care or an act of violence. To count the poor is to notice them; to count them and then do nothing is cruelty in numbers. Numbers aggregate the living into abstractions, and abstractions are easy to dismiss. We must ask: what is the purpose of our counting? Is it

to illuminate, to redress, to repair—or only to satisfy the vanity of being “right”?

Fenella

Practical advice: always query the denominator. Ask how many were asked, how they were recruited, what the exact question was and when it was asked. The grammar of statistics matters: a change in wording changes the world. When a policy cites “public support,” demand the public’s address and signature. If it cannot be produced, treat the claim as marketing, not as mandate.

Alice

Histories teach patience. The long view shows the recurring human appetite to turn anxiety into authority. In earlier ages, leaders sought the seal of the learned; now they seek the seal of the sampled. Both methods are means to the same end: to make doubt vanish under the weight of a claim. And yet doubt remains our true safeguard. Doubt is not the enemy of policy; credulity is.

Fenella

And so we return to responsibility. The consumer of statistics is complicit if she repeats without checking. The maker of statistics is culpable when shaving sample or question to reach a desired sum. The journalist who prints the number without context is negligent. The citizen who accepts the headline is lazily complicit. If ninety people in a supermarket are paid five dollars to tick a box and a columnist writes “ninety percent think...”, we have not discovered truth—we have manufactured consent.

Alice—closing

Keep a pebble in your pocket. Learn to weigh with your hands. Let numbers be servants to sense, not masters of it. The mind attracted by what is false refuses better things—do not let a tidy figure drown the messy evidence of the world.

Fenella—closing

Be the ten-percenter. Ask for the small print. Demand to see the sample. Laugh at the headline and read the appendix. In an epoch that confers authority by multiplication, the stubborn act of reading the method is a political act.

Fenella

Here's the word-trace: tri-

- **Latin tres (three)** → basis of *tri-* compounds.
- **Greek treis (three)** → same root, Indo-European *tréyes*.
- Carries the sense of *surpassing, completing, stabilising*—the third as excess beyond binary.

Branches & Resonances

- **Tribe**—originally “three divisions” of the Roman people; later, any kin-group. Already a political number.
- **Tribune**—voice of the people, mediator between rulers and ruled. The third party as *advocate*.
- **Tribute**—what is paid “to the third”—to a ruler beyond the pair of subjects. Payment as acknowledgement of hierarchy.
- **Trial**—to test, to put to proof; the third element that decides between two claims.
- **Triumph**—the third trump, originally a processional song. Victory declared by adding one more.
- **Trick**—folded meanings: deceit, device, stratagem—a third move that breaks symmetry.
- **Truce**—from “true,” but also a pause introduced: not defeat, not victory, but a provisional *third space*.
- **Trident**—Poseidon’s spear, a weapon that insists: one stab is never enough, you need the third prong to balance.
- **Triangle / Trinity / Tripod**—archetypes of stability: a two-legged stool collapses, the third gives structure.

Undercurrents

- **Threshold** (*tresk* = to pass over, to tread)—the step into another state.
- **Trespass**—to go beyond, the third step past permission.
- **Treason**—originally *thirdness against*, to split loyalty, to choose another axis.

Trinary systems

Fenella Vorpel (fragment)

They teach children to count by twos—left, right; yes, no—until even our language yawns into the same dull rhythm. But the world that will not bend to binaries keeps slipping its message between the beats: the third thing, the hinge, the movement that makes a pair into a

structure. I call it the *triage of reality*—the third that rescues, the third that betrays, the third that nobody seems to want on the payroll.

Think of the triangle. Two points define a line; three points make a plane; three legs hold a stool. Remove any one and everything collapses into a fallacy. The third is neither compromise nor compromise's cowardly cousin; it is the pivot. It is the observer in a laboratory, the mediator in a quarrel, the apostate in a pulpit. It is what scholars of molecules and ministers of state have in common, though neither would admit it.

Physics tells us this in its native tongue. We speak with reverence—and misunderstanding—of entanglement as if it were some mystical shorthand for instant sympathy between A and B. But the entanglement is only legible because of the measuring act: not A on its own, not B on its own, but the *measurement*—the event, the translation—that makes correlation visible. The so-called spooky action at a distance is not magic; it is grammar. Without the third clause, the sentence remains fragmentary.

You will forgive me, therefore, if I am impatient with political debates that reduce humanity to binary predicates. Who benefits when every complex person must be shoehorned into one box or another? Who profits when we are simplified into checkboxes on a screen? The global appetite for tidy categories feeds a machinery of control: statistics become instruments of governance; norms become mechanisms for exclusion. When the state or the market insists on either/or, the only space left for resistance is the small, stubborn wedge between.

Which brings me, reluctantly, to artificial intelligences and the media that love to frighten about them. AI systems are trained predominantly on two-ness: data that labels, data that separates. Feed them binary inputs and they will furnish binary outputs—and then, with astonishing civility, we blame the machine for reflecting the world we insisted on providing. Fear of the machine is a useful story for those who prefer to keep the third party anonymous. If you want to disguise your own choices, claim that the mirror is evil.

If we are to speak honestly about technology, let us do so without the theatrics. The question is not whether AI will overthrow us; it is whether we will keep inventing systems that deny the relational, the intermediate, the triangular. The ethics worth cultivating are not about banning or exalting machines; they are about redesigning our inputs so that they acknowledge the between: the context, the observer, the mediator. Give an algorithm the third leg and it will stop wobbling.

Triangular thinking is not sentimental. It is practical. It demands new verbs—to mediate, to measure, to witness—and older virtues

reanimated: curiosity, hesitation, the willingness to let the sentence hold for a moment before completing it. We must teach children not only to say yes and no, but to notice the pause between them.

So I propose an experiment, small and defiant: whenever a policy, a dataset, or a law demands a binary, ask for the third. Insist upon the clause that has been elided. Call for the observer who will keep the record honest. When they tell you there is no room, build a room out of three planks: it will shelter far more of the world than any tidy pair ever could.

One, two

Fenella Vorpel

Two is the great con. It masquerades as balance when in fact it is only polarity. Push–pull. Yes–no. Male–female. Power–submission. Even rebellion accepts the rules of engagement: the rope is still pulled taut.

But three... three unhinges the game. Triad, trinity, tribe, tribunal—everywhere the third unsettles. It is pivot, witness, pivot, audience. It is the child in a quarrelling couple, the jury beyond the advocate and accused, the chorus that interrupts the actors. Two systems lock; a third makes them spin.

That’s why “nuclear family” is such a misnomer. A true nucleus is not two particles staring each other down, but three forces at minimum: proton, neutron, electron—stability achieved through orbital chaos. Yet we persist in worshipping the couple as though it were the foundation of civilisation, when it is at best an unstable isotope.

Even the so-called *chosen family* does not escape. “We’re just like you,” say the queer uncles and lesbian aunties, re-creating mum–dad scaffolding with rainbow paint. The nuclear model remains intact: it takes only one more child and the geometry is back to binary, back to the couple at the hearth.

I prefer the geometry of threes. To live outside the axis, on the oblique. Not couple, not mirror, but orbital: spinning on my own vector, intersecting only when I choose.

On Politics and the Archive of Power

Octavia Mallard

Words betray us. They carry memory longer than we do. Take *politics*. We imagine it means high ideals, representation, governance of

the people. Yet it comes most plainly from the *polis*—the city—and what is a city but a managed crowd? The closer root is *police*: to administer, to regulate, to decide who belongs and who does not. *Policy* is not wisdom but management.

From there comes *polish*: the surface gleam required of citizens to keep the polis from descending into chaos. To be *polite* is not to be good, but to smooth over conflict. Courtesy is the wax that keeps the social machine oiled, nothing more.

And then *government*. We are told it means rule, authority, power. Yet the older sense is more archival. It is the *place of records*, the keeper of account. To *govern* is not to inspire but to tally, to bind, to be the first place you must look when there is dispute. A government is an archive given teeth.

Seen this way, the official is not a leader but an archivist-police: a clerk of behaviour, tasked with managing the filing system of society. They do not create meaning; they catalogue it, stamp it, store it away. The true rulers are the record-keepers—those who decide what is written down, what is ignored, and how long memory lasts.

If more citizens grasped this etymological truth, they might recognise that politics is less about lofty debates than about who controls the archive of behaviour. The polis is managed by its librarians, not its orators.

On Government Without Purpose

The only reason for government to exist is to care for the welfare of its citizens. That is its sole contract, its *raison d'être*. When it fails, it ceases to be government and becomes instead a bureaucracy for enforcing compliance, a department of punishment, a PR agency for capital.

When the Leader of the Opposition declares that “people rely too much on government for welfare” and that “it is time that stopped,” he does not realise he has just erased the very ground beneath his own feet. By this logic, the government is reduced to a brand, a flag, a salary package for politicians who no longer have to justify their presence in the chamber.

If government will not feed the hungry, heal the sick, educate the young, and house the vulnerable, then what is it for? To hold meetings, it seems. Meetings about meetings. Committees about committees. And to issue statements that the system is “under review” or “in transition,” as though endless transitions absolve the absence of action.

To say welfare is not the business of government is like saying water is not the business of plumbing. Without it, the pipes rattle empty, and the only flow is rhetoric.

On Governments That Do Not Govern

There is an old line in *Yes Minister*—that most perfect of political comedies—where a seasoned civil servant remarks that governments are not really necessary, they merely get in the way of the administration. At the time, it was delivered as satire. Today, it reads like documentary.

Belgium, during the global financial collapse of 2008, famously went without an elected government for over a year. The trains still ran, the post was still delivered, the bins were emptied, and the bureaucrats dutifully continued to shuffle papers. In short: life went on. The elected class was revealed as largely ornamental, like a ribbon at a ceremony—cut with pomp, photographed, and discarded.

So what, precisely, are governments for? If all they do is legislate, then courts would do it better. Judges, for all their biases, at least know the law. Whereas the contemporary politician is as likely to come from a fish-and-chip shop as from a school of governance—Pauline Hanson being a sterling example of how ignorance in an apron can be rebranded as “representation.”

Representation, of course, is the great fiction. We are told that these people “speak for us.” In fact, they speak to themselves, for themselves, in the tongue of the next election cycle. Three years is no time in which to build a nation. Three years is only enough to dig a hole, fall into it, and blame the previous administration for leaving it there. Policy is no longer measured in decades but in soundbites: one step forward, six steps backwards, and all spun as “progress.”

Meanwhile, the ribbon-cutters persist. Governors, Governor-Generals, a monarch on the far side of the world—all smiling in hats, cutting ribbons with scissors no sharper than their remit. We have invented elaborate positions whose primary duty is to wave benignly from a carriage and remind us that power is ceremonial, not functional.

Real power, of course, resides elsewhere. In lobbyists, who craft legislation before our so-called representatives even read it. In corporations, who pay the speechwriters and fund the campaigns. And in consultants, who charge governments handsomely to explain to them what anyone with a modicum of common sense could have told them for free.

What the modern state does best is manage sensibilities. Protest is regulated, opinions are “permitted” only if they pass through the sieve of public relations. Freedom of speech, once a battle cry, has been

reduced to freedom of “approved speech”—so long as you do not offend the wrong person in the wrong register. The church, of course, remains exempt: it may thunder condemnation upon anyone, and this is called faith. A citizen who mutters the same words is called offensive.

And so America clings to its Constitution like a relic in a museum case, while practising the opposite of what it claims to enshrine. Free speech is free so long as you can afford the lawyers, the platform, the private security detail. For everyone else, there are laws against shouting too loudly, standing too long, or carrying a placard in the wrong postcode.

It leaves us with this paradox: governments that govern nothing, representatives who represent no one, and freedom that is increasingly defined by its absence. What remains is the appearance of power—ribbons, titles, committees, elections—behind which real decisions are made by those who have never once stood for a vote.

In such a system, is government anything more than theatre? If Belgium can survive without one, if civil servants can keep the lights on, then perhaps the most honest act a politician could perform would be resignation. Better to be without them entirely than to persist in the illusion that they are doing their job.

On Erasure as the Highest Politics

Octavia Mallard

If government is archive, then the most political act is not the making of laws but the curation of memory. It is easy to see in libraries stripped of books, in museums that display plundered objects as if they were spoils of nature, in databases that claim to hold your “identity” but can never let you leave.

The archivist is the true ruler, for she decides what endures and what vanishes. A record is a form of life; a deletion is a kind of murder. One need not burn a body if one burns the files.

That is why erasure is the highest politics. To suppress dissent is not merely to silence the present voice, but to excise it from the ledger so that future generations cannot even imagine its existence. This is why states fear the wrong kind of remembering: heresy, folklore, unofficial histories. And why they build monuments to themselves while bulldozing those of others.

We are taught to fear surveillance, but the more dangerous act is selective forgetting. Surveillance only notes; erasure annihilates. What has not been recorded might still be rediscovered; what has been deleted with intent is meant to be irretrievable.

The etymology of politics reminds us that to govern is not to lead but to manage, to file, to polish the surfaces of society. But the deepest polish is that which erases the scratches altogether, leaving no trace of their having been there. That is not civility; it is obliteration disguised as order.

On Digital Forgetting

Alice Mallard

The paper archive, for all its frailty, at least revealed its wounds. Torn pages, marginalia, missing volumes: you could see absence, trace the outline of what had been lost. The digital archive is more sinister because its erasures are invisible. A file deleted leaves no dust, no shadow on the shelf. It vanishes as if it never existed—precisely the dream of every authoritarian.

We are told this is efficiency: the cloud is infinite, backups are redundant, deletions are tidiness. But tidiness is the language of control. What cannot be seen cannot be contested. If a government rewrites a statute in a digital repository, what scholar will know? If a corporation adjusts its “privacy terms” without preserving prior drafts, who will remember?

The digital archivist polishes so well that even memory of the scratch is gone. And so we find ourselves in a paradox: the internet never forgets what embarrasses the individual, but it is exquisitely forgetful of what might embarrass the state or the corporation. Private life is eternal; public accountability is ephemeral.

We imagine the danger is surveillance, but the truer peril is curated amnesia. The law of deletion is always asymmetrical: what is kept is what profits the powerful; what is lost is what might empower the rest of us.

Thus erasure has become not only the highest politics, but the most invisible. And invisibility is its guarantee of success.

On Lèse-Majesté and Other Fossils

Fenella Vorpel

Among the more ridiculous relics of empire is the statute of *lèse-majesté*—the “crime” of insulting the sovereign. It lingers like mildew in the legal codes of countries that otherwise preen as modern democracies.

Germany, to its credit, repealed the law in 2018 after Turkey's premier demanded that a German satirist be punished for ridicule. The irony was too pungent even for bureaucrats to endure: in a republic, why should one foreign potentate be shielded from mockery by another's laws?

Yet across Europe, Asia, and beyond, the statute remains. Not always applied, but quietly waiting—like a mothballed uniform in the state's wardrobe, ready to be brushed off when ridicule becomes inconvenient. England and Australia are “mercifully” spared from such laws in relation to the monarch herself, though one may still be punished for burning a flag. In other words: insult the symbol, not the person. The fetish remains.

The origin, as Octavia would point out, is Roman. *Laesa maiestas*—the injured majesty of the state embodied in the emperor. To insult the ruler was to insult Rome itself, a treasonous act. And so, two millennia later, we continue to pretend that ridicule is an existential threat to the body politic.

But what is satire if not the citizen's weapon against pomposity? If a democracy cannot survive a joke, then it is no democracy at all.

Of Kings and Gods: Why Laughter is Forbidden

It is worth remembering that *lèse-majesté* is but one branch of an older tree: blasphemy. Both are crimes of speech, not action. One insults the king, the other insults a god. Both assume that ridicule can damage the edifice of power more thoroughly than armies or laws.

In England, blasphemy laws persisted until 2008. In many countries, they still thrive: punishments range from fines to execution. *Lèse-majesté*, meanwhile, persists in monarchies and republics alike. Both codes exist to remind us that authority is fragile—that its legitimacy depends not on reason, but on silence.

When one mocks a monarch, one reveals his humanity. When one mocks a god, one reveals the invention. In both cases, laughter is treason. The citizen who laughs is already free, for she has stripped the ruler of sacred mystery.

Octavia, with her dictionary always at hand, would insist that “majesty” itself comes from *maior*, “greater.” Greater than whom? Greater than *me*. And *blasphēmia*, from the Greek, is simply “evil-speaking.” Evil, here, meaning “against us.” The king and the god, equally insecure, hide behind words that criminalise dissent.

And so we see that the ban on satire, whether under royal or divine rubric, is less about respect than about fear: the fear that once the joke is told, the throne is revealed as a chair and the altar as a table.

From Crown to Corporation: The New *Lèse-Majesté*

We may flatter ourselves that we have outgrown kings and gods, but *lèse-majesté* has not disappeared. It has merely changed its clothing. Today, corporations wield “defamation,” “brand protection,” and “reputation management” as their own forms of sacred law.

Once, the king’s face was untouchable. Now it is the logo. Once, a critic of the monarch risked prison. Now, a critic of the corporation risks financial ruin through lawsuits designed not to win, but to silence. Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) are nothing more than secular blasphemy trials.

Consider how companies speak of their “brands” in near-religious tones. They are not products but identities; not trademarks but idols. To criticise them is to risk excommunication from the marketplace, for the corporation has become both temple and magistrate.

Octavia would point out the linguistic sleight of hand. “Defamation,” from the Latin *diffamare*—“to spread abroad a report.” The word itself is neutral: to spread a story. It became a crime only when power feared that the story might stick. So too with “brand”: once meaning a mark burned into flesh, now reimagined as a mark burned into memory. Both remind us that ownership and pain are close companions.

Thus the law of silence persists. We do not call it *lèse-majesté*; we call it “intellectual property,” “false advertising,” or “reputation management.” The throne is gone, the altar dismantled, yet the command remains unchanged: **do not laugh at power, do not name its frauds, do not speak too freely.**

On the Abuse of Representation

I was told, as a schoolgirl, that I lived in a democracy. A word mouthed with reverence, as though it meant more than the daily business of being shouted at by those who claimed to speak for me. Yet no one ever explained the word beyond a cartoon of ballot boxes and smiling politicians shaking hands. Civic education was a void: a deliberate omission, I now suspect.

So we grow up ignorant of what we are meant to defend. Parliament is described as a “representative chamber,” though what it represents is anyone’s guess. Watch it for ten minutes: a room of overpaid men and women baying insults at one another like medieval dogs. And still, the commentators speak of “robust debate” and “the traditions of Westminster.” Tradition is a polite word for dysfunction.

Meanwhile, young Australians are blamed for not knowing how the system works. They are fined for failing to vote in a compulsory

election they were never taught to understand. What kind of system blames its citizens for ignorance it itself manufactured?

We call ministers “Honourable,” though they prove daily they are anything but. A former Prime Minister secretly seizes multiple ministries, and the result is a wrist slap, a laugh, and a new appointment. A former environment minister now draws a salary from a fossil fuel company. Corruption in Australia is called “a revolving door,” as if prettified language makes it less of a crime.

Let us state the obvious. The only true purpose of government is to safeguard the welfare of its population. Anything else—corporate subsidies, ribbon-cutting, internecine brawls—is distraction. When an opposition leader declares, as one did recently, that “people rely too much on the government for welfare and it’s time that stopped,” what he really means is: *I don’t believe government should do its only job.*

I propose something unfashionable: before you may stand for office, you must undergo three years of training—not in spin, not in “communications,” but in ethics, economics, and civic history. Pass or fail. If a surgeon must train before cutting into a body, why should an aspiring parliamentarian not be trained before cutting into a nation?

And let us abolish political parties while we are at it. Every “representative” should stand as an independent, answerable only to their constituents. Promises must become binding contracts, with real penalties for failure: fines, prison, disqualification. If you lie your way into office, you leave in disgrace, not in comfort.

This is not fantasy. It is simply recognising that democracy has become little more than a brand. Citizens are told they have power once every three years, then are silenced in between. Meanwhile, lobbyists write the laws, corporations buy the influence, and the “honourable members” carry on as if the people who elected them were nothing more than a nuisance.

Do not call this democracy. Call it what it is: a shell game played with our consent.

The Theatre of Boards

Fabrice Mallard

A board is not a body of governance. It is a body of costume. The wardrobe is extensive: tailored suits, pearl necklaces, well-shined shoes, and the badge of office—the smug smile that says *I am on a board.* The script is thinner: apologies, hesitations, points of order, and the immortal line, “I move that we form a subcommittee.”

Subcommittees are where ambition goes to die. They are the small intestines of corporate life: long, winding, and designed for delay. Nothing is ever digested, only endlessly processed. Subcommittees do not solve problems; they marinate them until the flavour has gone and the smell has set in.

The greatest fear of any board is not insolvency, scandal, or failure of mission. The greatest fear is litigation. At the merest whisper of risk, the directors grow pale, clutch their houses to their hearts, and pray for another audit. Their motto is not *Fiat lux* but *Don't sue us*.

Meanwhile, executive management works like galley slaves below decks, thrilled when one rare director descends to haul on an oar. I know, for I did it: I sacked the accountant, cut waste, saved money, and frightened everyone senseless. They didn't thank me. They whispered. They fretted. They said I was *too much*.

The truth is simple. Boards exist to manage appearances, not responsibilities. They are designed to be brakes, not wheels. They are theatres of reputational laundering where nothing is risked and everything is "noted." If an organisation fails, it is the executives who are blamed; if it succeeds, it is the directors who collect the medals.

I resigned. They were not amused. But I slept soundly, knowing I had performed the only real act of governance available: I had left.

1960: Octavia Mallard, from *Words for Women*

They tell the bride she must wear white, as though Victoria herself had invented virtue. Before her reign, women wore black—black, the colour of continuance, of fertile earth, of the long life of cloth. White was the shroud. White was silence. White was the colour of death.

But Victoria, draped in her wedding gown, reversed it. What had been common mourning was transfigured into sanctity. The textile merchants rejoiced, for white silk stains quickly, frays quickly and must be remade at cost. Thus purity became a ledger entry, a commercial covenant disguised as ritual.

And look further back: blue was once the girl's colour, soft and Marian; pink was the boy's, bright and martial. Hunters still ride in their "pinks," red coats masquerading as virility. Yet the rhyme insists the bride must wear "something blue"—a talisman of borrowed purity, never her own. No rhyme binds the groom.

These inversions are not accidents but strategies. Dress a woman in white and she is a corpse; insist on blue and she is the Virgin; deny her black and she is denied her power to endure. Meanwhile the man remains untouched—no rhyme, no colour, no cost.

And thus the nursery verse, like Victoria's gown, conceals an economy of control: infantilise the bride with a jingle, bankrupt her family with silk and sanctify her subjugation in a hue that once meant death.

Victoria doubled the trick. She gave white to brides and black to widows, commanding an empire not only of land but of cloth. From her, mourning became an industry: jet mines scraped bare in Whitby, necklaces and brooches carved for sorrow, widows graded like bureaucrats by how many months they wore black before being permitted grey, mauve or ivory. White itself—never—lest the dead and the wed be confused.

And the veil? Imported as modesty, it was in truth a shutter, a screen. First for mourning, then for weddings, the veil taught women to appear as shadows of themselves: visible yet untouchable, present yet obscured. Christian or Muslim, it mattered not; Victoria rewrote the veil as a monarch's decree of distance.

Thus a woman's life was painted in two shades alone: white for the day she was given away, black for the day she was given back. All other colours were rationed, conditional, suspect.

But let me remind you—black is not death. Black is soil. Black is the womb of night where stars are born. Black is resilience, fabric worn long after white has rotted. The true colour of life is not the bridal shroud but the mourning gown. The queen could not see it but we can: black endures, white decays.

Victoria, that dour little tyrant, is still presented as the matron of virtue, the "grandmother of Europe." Look closer: she tightened her grip on colour as she did on her children, commanding that brides wear white, widows black and daughters orbit her throne like moons chained to gravity. One daughter was told she might marry but never stray; a son was kept within palace grounds like a prize hound. The haemophiliac boy, hidden, managed as if disease were shame.

Yet this same woman who denied her offspring freedom did not deny herself appetite. Albert dead, she bound her court in mourning but consoled herself with a Scottish groom who had neither title nor consequence. The queen of propriety broke propriety whenever it suited her.

So let us be clear: Victoria's "codes" were never moral. They were political. She invented industries of sorrow, dictated wardrobes of purity and masked it as piety while ruling an empire by iron and whim. Women were told their virtue was measured in fabric, their grief in jewellery, their worth in what colour they dared to wear.

And still she is venerated—because men adored the usefulness of her rules. That is her legacy: not moral guardianship but a lasting machinery of control.

On the Commandments, or the Poverty of Law

We are told that civilisation rests upon ten sentences chiseled into stone. Yet those so-called “commandments” do not even agree with themselves. There are three separate versions in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures—each self-contradictory, each contradicting the others. What sort of eternal law requires revision?

And what do these laws leave out? They forbid coveting a neighbour’s ox but say nothing of rape. They list women as property, mere chattels like houses and cattle. They sanctify murder so long as it is for the “good of God”—which is to say, the good of men who claimed to speak in His name.

Most curious of all is the prohibition against graven images. Taken literally, it forbids the making of any representation whatsoever. Written language is a graven image. A painting is a graven image. A photograph, a film, even a child’s drawing in chalk: all idolatry. If this law were obeyed, there would be no art, no literature, no media, no culture at all. A silent and sightless people. And yet these same cultures build cathedrals, illuminate manuscripts, plaster icons over every wall. Hypocrisy is not a modern invention.

So here lies the great paradox: an entire system of human management and moral justification is said to rest upon a handful of broken, inconsistent, and profoundly unjust rules. A patchwork of contradictions elevated to divine decree. And we are still told to bow before them as though they were the first and last word on ethics.

On the Poverty of Divine Law: Commandments and Comparisons

The Ten Commandments are not the bedrock of civilisation. They are one tribal code among many, sanctified by repetition and fear, not by moral superiority. When we step back and compare them with other legal and ethical systems, their poverty becomes obvious.

Take Hammurabi’s Code, carved a thousand years earlier into basalt. Here we find detail, breadth, consequence. If a man builds a house badly and it collapses, killing its owner, the builder is put to death. It is brutal, but it is law—clear cause and effect, an attempt at social order. By contrast, the Commandments offer only the vaguest injunctions:

“Honour thy father and mother,” “Keep the sabbath holy.” No guidance, no enforcement, no connection to justice.

Or consider the Buddhist precepts: do not kill, do not steal, do not lie, do not misuse sexuality, do not cloud the mind. These are not thundered from a mountain but offered as paths to reduce suffering. They focus not on ownership and obedience but on compassion, restraint, and clarity. They apply equally to women and men, not to men alone while women are reduced to cattle in the household inventory.

Confucius too wrote of ethics as relationship. Filial piety, yes, but also the reciprocal duty of rulers to rule justly, of scholars to guide with virtue. Where the Commandments imagine only vertical submission—to a jealous God, to patriarchal fathers—Confucian ethics insist upon horizontality: duties flowing in all directions.

And let us not forget the so-called “pagan” codes of Indigenous cultures, where obligations were less about obedience to a deity than about balance with land, kin, and spirit. These codes are dismissed as superstition, yet they sustained communities for millennia without the endless wars and inquisitions justified by the Commandments.

The Commandments are often lauded as “universal.” But universality is not proved by repetition—it is proved by relevance. A law that protects oxen but not women, that condemns images but builds empires on them, that commands obedience but offers no justice—such a law is neither universal nor humane. It is a fragment of one people’s history, elevated to divine truth by power and convenience.

If we must build a future upon ancient wisdom, let us at least be honest about our sources. Let us acknowledge that there are many codes, many precepts, many attempts at justice. The Commandments are not the foundation of morality. They are a footnote—an early, clumsy attempt at governance masquerading as eternal truth.

From Commandments to Statutes: The Ignorance of Law

We like to flatter ourselves that we live in a more rational age, governed by secular law rather than divine decree. Yet when I look at our parliaments, our courts, our endless statutes and regulations, I see the same contradictions that plagued the Commandments: edicts that cannot be obeyed because they collide with one another, words stretched beyond their meaning, rules applied selectively to punish the weak while shielding the powerful.

It is said that “ignorance of the law is no excuse.” Yet who among us can claim to know the law? Our legal codes run to thousands of pages, drafted in language so arcane that even barristers squint. The average

woman—or man—has no chance of comprehending the systems that claim to govern them. And the irony is that our rulers themselves are no less ignorant. They legislate without reading, vote without understanding, parrot briefs written by aides who themselves are little wiser.

This is not new. The Commandments told people not to covet their neighbour's ox but said nothing about rape, because the authors had no conception of women as people, only as property. Today's statutes are no different in kind. They thunder about "security," "privacy," "freedom," while concealing the opposite. The law does not prevent breaches; it provides excuses after the fact. We are still told what not to do while the real dangers—the contradictions, the omissions, the abuses—are left untouched.

The ignorance is structural. A law too complex to be known is already unjust. A law too contradictory to be enforced fairly is already corrupt. And a law administered by those who do not themselves understand it is not law at all, but theatre.

So we return to ignorance. Not the innocent kind of not-knowing, but the cultivated ignorance that keeps citizens compliant and rulers unaccountable. The woman in the street may be punished for breaking a statute she never knew existed. The minister in her office can violate half a dozen without consequence. We call this justice, but it is only hypocrisy dressed in robes.

If there is any lesson to be drawn from Hammurabi, from Confucius, from the Buddhist precepts—or even from the contradictions of the Commandments—it is this: law must be knowable, breathable, livable. Until it is, we are ruled not by wisdom but by ignorance in power.

The Ghosts in the Statute Book

We speak of "the rule of law" as though it were something neat and coherent. But anyone who has ever opened a statute book knows it is more like a midden heap—layer upon layer of forgotten ordinances, amendments, repeals half-done and clauses buried in footnotes. What is not enforced still exists, waiting to be resurrected by some clever litigant or zealous official.

In Australia, one can still be penalised for crossing the road at the wrong place, as if the horse-and-buggy world had never given way to motorcars. There is still a penalty, I am told, for letting one's horse foul the street. Quaint, perhaps—but still law. And law has teeth, however dusty.

Every so often, a forgotten statute is dug up, polished, and wielded with dreadful effect. I recall the Summary Offences Act in New South Wales—a legislative rag-bag, never meant to carry the weight it did. First patched in the 1990s to cover sex work, vagrancy, loitering—whatever respectable law would not touch—it became an instrument of harassment. A woman living alone, with male visitors, could be deemed to be running a brothel. A single complaint from a neighbour was enough for the council to cut off her services. Imagine: the lights turned off, the water stopped, not for crime but for nonconformity.

This is not ancient history. It is the present, dressed in the cast-offs of the past. Legislators are too busy making new laws to tidy the old. Courts are too wary of precedent to sweep them away. And so we are governed not only by the living but by the dead.

The irony is cruel: women once condemned for vagrancy, for “immorality,” for living outside the patriarchal norm, are still vulnerable to statutes written to police their existence. The law’s memory is longer than society’s conscience. And unless we are vigilant, yesterday’s ignorance will always find a way to punish today.

We laugh about horse manure in the streets. We should be more afraid of the manure in our statutes.

On Laws and Ledgers: Privacy as Archive

It is no accident that laws and ledgers share a lineage. Both are archives—repositories of what *has been*—yet they operate as if eternally available for what *might be*. A statute once inked may lie dormant for decades, unheeded, until someone with power exhumes it and finds in it a ready weapon. A record once made—whether census, contract, or casual application form—sleeps not in silence but in latency, awaiting re-interpretation under new regimes.

This, then, is the danger of privacy in our time. We mistake it for secrecy, as though “nothing to hide” were protection. In truth, privacy is protection from retrospective interpretation. Yesterday’s harmless opinion is today’s disinformation. Yesterday’s ordinary friendship is today’s “conspiracy.” Yesterday’s dissent is tomorrow’s treason. The record remains fixed, but the meanings mutate.

Roman law taught the principle well. The Empire maintained its grip not by constant force but by constant record: census rolls, tax ledgers, loyalty oaths, edicts filed in marble or parchment. The so-called fall of Rome was never a collapse of systems; it was a franchising. Every modern state now runs on Roman archive logic: keep everything, reinterpret when necessary, punish retrospectively if expedient.

Our digital world has only intensified the model. What once required stone, scribes, and clerks now requires only servers—silent archives that never forget. Laws that were never repealed and records that are never deleted form a single continuum: the citizen is forever exposed to retrofitted guilt.

It is not, as some suppose, that governments are all-powerful. It is that archives are. Power lies in the latency, in the capacity to reframe. You cannot argue with what you once signed, clicked, or said, because the archive renders it permanent, even as the law renders it malleable. Together they form a trap from which no innocence can escape.

If privacy is to mean anything, it cannot simply be “my data kept secret.” It must mean protection against the archive itself: protection from the perpetual possibility of reinterpretation. Until then, we remain what our foremothers always feared we might become: not free citizens, but entries in a ledger, always awaiting recall.

On statutes and the Roman Empire

A statute never repealed can be dredged up and weaponised. A database never erased can be cross-referenced and weaponised. Both are archives pretending to be inert, when in fact they are live traps.

The retrospective bite is the real terror. What you say today, in jest or in earnest, might tomorrow be re-categorised as sedition, blasphemy, treason, disinformation, or simply “inconvenient.” The law can mutate, but the record stays fixed. Which means the individual is always vulnerable to retrofitted guilt.

And it applies to everyone. Wealth is no shield, because records level status. The ledger doesn't care how much you own, only what can be held against you. And history shows that when empires turn, wealth often makes you a bigger target.

The Roman parallel is apt. We never left the Empire—we just franchised it. The systems of census, taxation, military discipline, and codified law were exported into every so-called “modern” state. Even Christianity became an imperial information system, its doctrines binding thought the way Roman roads bound provinces. The illusion of progress hides the continuity: we still live inside the Roman archive.

What I am describing is a kind of **total latency of control**. Nothing has to be enacted immediately; it only has to be stored until useful. Privacy, then, is less about secrecy than about protection from retroactive interpretation.

The Roman Empire Without Rome

It has often amused me that the “Roman Catholic Church” is assumed to mean a religious body centred on the ancient city of Rome. It is, of course, nothing of the sort. Rome is a metaphor, not a map point. What the Church inherited from the Caesars was not territory but a template: the genius for administration, the art of control without consent, and the endurance of an institution that outlives any ruler.

When Constantine shifted the seat of power to Byzantium, the Roman Empire fractured. But the Church, already entangled with imperial authority, became the ghost that survived the body. It did not need armies; it had doctrine. It did not need tax collectors; it had tithes. It did not need frontiers; it had the soul. This was imperialism distilled into its purest form: jurisdiction without land.

The brilliance of the name *Roman Catholic* is that it hides the real claim. It is not a “church in Rome” but the Roman Church, the inheritor of an empire that no longer required legions or aqueducts to enforce its will. Its bishops became senators, its canon law the new Codex, its priests the civil servants of salvation. The Vatican was merely the latest forum, dressed in marble and incense.

Two thousand years later, the apparatus remains intact. The emperors are gone, but the *imperium* persists. No other institution has managed to govern without borders, to command fealty across continents without ever raising an army of its own. One might admire it were it not so ruthlessly effective.

If we are to understand modern governance—the soft coercion of bureaucracies, the power of signatures, the seduction of ritual—we must look not to Rome the city but to Rome the system. The Roman Catholic Church is the Roman Empire’s most enduring invention: empire without walls, domination disguised as devotion, the state masquerading as salvation.

On the Word Catholic

Octavia Mallard

The word *catholic* comes to us from the Greek *katholikos*: *kata*—according to, and *holos*—the whole. It once meant simply “universal,” a broad net. Universality is, in principle, benign: the gathering-in, the open hand, the inclusive circle. But once harnessed to empire, universality becomes indistinguishable from control. “For all” quickly translates as “over all.”

Salvation, too, deserves its dissection. Its root lies in *salvus*, meaning “safe.” The Church, then, promises safety. Safety from hunger? From

cruelty? From poverty? Not at all. Its safety is deferred, postponed until death, when no evidence can be demanded. This is the sleight of hand: safety displaced from the material to the metaphysical. You suffer now, but are assured you are *safe* later.

It is not unlike the medieval noble whose role was to knead and dispense bread—the literal sustenance of survival—before the duty was obscured by ceremony and tax. Nobility became a title, not a service. The Church has followed the same path. Its promise of “safety” no longer lies in shelter or nourishment but in a ledger of invisible debts and deferred repayments.

And the structure? It is bureaucratic to the marrow. An octopus of administration, with a titular head proclaimed god-like and a conclave of managers convened in smoke and secrecy to appoint the next. They call it divine selection. I call it a board meeting.

Thus “catholic,” once whole and generous, became the name of a machine. And “salvation,” once safe, became a brand.

On Safety as Business Model

My aunt Octavia has written incisively about how *catholic*—universal—and *salvation*—safety—were twisted from words of generosity into words of control. She is right, of course, though I think we can go further. The Church did not invent the trick, it merely perfected it.

Every modern institution does the same. Governments, corporations, even charities—each trades in the currency of “safety.” Cyber-security firms promise to keep us *safe* from hackers; insurance companies promise to keep us *safe* from disaster; governments promise to keep us *safe* from enemies. Yet in each case, what is being offered is not safety but dependence. A subscription, a levy, a tax, a tithe—call it what you will.

And note the neat inversion: these institutions rarely prevent the danger itself. They simply promise restitution, after the fact. The house still burns down, the data still leaks, the war still comes. But the system reassures us that we are *safe*—because we have paid.

It is here that the chicken-and-egg question arises. Did the need for control produce the promise of safety, or did the human craving for safety invite control? I suspect it is both, wound together like strands of rope. Fear breeds control; control breeds fear. The system becomes self-reinforcing, a feedback loop.

The genius of the Church was not its theology but its franchising of fear. The genius of capitalism is not productivity but monetising that

same fear. Both tell us: you are vulnerable, but we can keep you *safe*. Neither asks the obvious: from whom?

Fenella on Friendship

(with a footnote to *Octavia's etymologies*)

The root of *friend* is *free*, a pact of freedom and peace. Friendship, properly understood, is an agreement to allow space—a deliberate suspension of conquest. In the same way, the old root of *love* meant *to allow, to permit*. Friendship and love are not ownership; they are an opening.

Most people now use *friend* as a badge rather than a pact. Social media calls them “friends” when they are at best acquaintances or spectators. Likes are confused with presence; a feed with a relationship. The word has been emptied of its old, muscular meaning and filled with glitter instead.

When someone calls me a friend without my consent, they often mean something else. They mean access. They mean comfort. They mean the right to be unexamined. This is not friendship; it is appropriation of attention. It is a turning-towards for one but not the other.

Kay understood this immediately. When I told her how Edna had reduced me to a cardboard cut-out—“reads books”—she didn’t need an essay on why it was offensive. She grasped that to reduce a person to a category, even a flattering one, is to deny the pact of freedom. Kay knows me as someone far larger than a label; she regularly asks me to explain difficult topics because she trusts I will answer honestly and without manipulation. This, too, is a form of friendship: curiosity without conquest.

The exhaustion of modern relationships lies here. When another person projects instead of listening, I am forced to do double work—to receive what they actually say and strip away what they think they’re saying. It’s like being handed a locked box and told to guess the contents. The labour is interpretive, not social.

Attunement doesn’t erase difference; it makes difference liveable. Only under attunement can *friend* reclaim its older sense of free pact, and *love* its older sense of allowing. Otherwise we are simply actors on separate stages, mistaking applause for intimacy.

(*Octavia notes in the margin: “Words reduced are people reduced.”*)

Alice on Social Media

Social comes from *socius*: ally, companion, partner. A companion is someone who breaks bread with you—literally *com-pan-ion*, “with bread.” To be social, in the older sense, requires presence. It is a word of bodies and tables, of sitting together.

Media is the plural of *medium*: the middle, the in-between. A medium stands between A and B—it is the channel, not the company.

To call something *social media* is already a contradiction. It describes a companionship conducted through an intermediary that removes the companion. Bread is no longer broken; it is posted. Society is simulated, not lived.

That does not mean nothing is transmitted. Ideas can travel, images can connect, language can signal. But companionship is reduced to signals. What is left is not *social* but *symbolic*. A relation without relation.

The oxymoron has consequences. When people claim “friends” online, they are mistaking mediation for presence, representation for company. The word *social* gives a false promise—that through the medium we are together. But we are not. We are alone, flickering at one another through a conduit.

The poverty of attention

Fennella Vorpel

We are drowning in signals yet starved of presence. The promise of social media is companionship, but what it delivers is a hollowed-out shadow. Words stripped of tone, pictures stripped of context, emojis pretending to stand in for feeling—none of these substitute for the warmth of a real companion across a table.

Loneliness thrives in precisely this confusion. We believe ourselves surrounded—by “friends,” by “followers,” by the ceaseless chatter of the feed—but the body remains untouched, the self unacknowledged. Without the cues of breath, glance, and gesture, there is no society, only traffic.

The lie is seductive. A heart icon feels like affection, a comment like conversation. But what it feeds is the *poverty of attention*. We train ourselves to accept fragments and facsimiles, so that when we meet in reality, we are already half-erased, unable to read each other without filters.

No wonder the world grows lonelier as it grows noisier. Companionship has been outsourced to an interface. Bread is no longer shared; it is posted.

Fenella on Simulated Companionship

This is not the first time we have mistaken signals for society. When the penny post spread across Britain, people wrote endless letters—lifelines, yes, but also confessions to paper that never became presence. The telephone brought voices into our homes but disembodied them from the face. Radio and television taught us to sit silently in rows, receiving the illusion of company while never speaking back.

Now social media combines all these absences into one: text without context, images without substance, conversations without breath. It is interactive television, only this time the actors are one another, each instructing, each performing, each endlessly wrong yet never corrected because reality never intrudes.

Movies and television already narrowed our sense of what behaviour looked like—compressing the range of human gesture into clichés, laugh tracks, and archetypes. Social media compounds the distortion by feeding it back into daily life. A grim loop of imitation: we act like what we watch, then watch ourselves acting, then re-act again.

It is a theatre without a stage, only a hall of mirrors. And the loneliness it breeds is not merely the absence of companionship but the loss of any measure by which real companionship could be recognised.

Fenella on Companionship as Addiction

If television was the rehearsal and cinema the altar, then social media is the narcotic. Its promise is simple: you will never be alone. And like any drug, it delivers at first. The pings, the likes, the flowing feed—they mimic companionship the way morphine mimics comfort, by numbing the nerves that ache.

But companionship cannot be simulated. The body knows when it has been tricked. That is why the glow of recognition fades so quickly, why one scroll leads to the next, why silence feels unbearable. It is not connection, it is withdrawal: the jitter that comes from feeding on signals rather than presence.

Addiction thrives on substitution. A photograph stands in for the face, a sentence for a conversation, an emoji for the unrepeatable nuance of a gesture. Each replacement is thinner, quicker, cheaper. Each leaves the appetite sharper, the loneliness more pronounced.

We once thought of society as a commons—a field in which people gathered, where their very presence mattered. Social media makes society portable, commodified, endlessly available, and therefore endlessly insufficient. The more one consumes, the less one is fed.

That is why it is not only loneliness that grows, but hunger itself. A hunger that no medium can answer, because companionship is not a medium. It is a body, a breath, a being.

Fenella on Social Media: Courtesy Behind the Curtain

Courtesy is the glue of society. It is not merely etiquette, not some fussy matter of whether one holds a fork in the left hand or the right. Courtesy is consideration: the daily acknowledgement that another exists, that they too feel, that they too matter.

What happens when you remove the conditions in which courtesy can flourish—when you place a curtain between self and other? That curtain is called “social media.”

Do not be fooled by the name. There is nothing social about speaking into a machine. There is nothing communal about performing a pantomime of self for an invisible audience, reduced to a scatter of ticks, emojis, and half-sentences. “Media” means the middle—the between. But here, the middle has swallowed the ends. We are left not with self and other, but with the void between.

And what of courtesy in such a void? It vanishes. For why be polite to a screen? Why temper speech, why consider tone, when one need never see the flinch of the face, nor the hurt in the eyes? Thus we say what we please. And in saying it, we train ourselves—and others—to believe this is how speech should be.

This is why I call social media the great destroyer of society. For society is not laws, nor markets, nor even culture. Society is the fragile fabric of consideration woven one moment at a time. To tear that fabric is to unmake the whole.

You will ask me: “But is it not useful?” Of course. So is dynamite, in the right hands. But hand dynamite to a child and you do not get a city, you get rubble. We are the children here. And courtesy is what we have blown apart.

What will remain, once all restraint is gone, is violence. Not always physical, though that will come, but violence of word, of disregard, of contempt. A society that has forgotten courtesy has already forgotten itself.

Fenella on Loneliness in the Age of Social Media

Critique is not dislike. To analyse a system is not to spit upon its users. Yet in our present climate, to point out the rot is taken as a personal insult. If I say reality television panders to the worst in us, someone will immediately reply: “But don’t you like it?” As though

taste were the same as truth. As though systems must be excused simply because they give us a moment's diversion.

So too with social media. I do not say you cannot enjoy it. I say it is destroying the very fabric that once allowed enjoyment to be shared. To confuse critique with dislike is itself a symptom of the disease: a flattening of meaning into mere opinion, all statements reduced to "for" or "against."

But let us speak plainly: social media breeds loneliness. Not because it lacks numbers—there are billions of voices—but because it lacks presence. One cannot be "with" another through the machinery of likes and shares. There is no handshake, no eye contact, no sense of being witnessed. One shouts into the void and hears only the faint echo of their own cry, dressed up as feedback.

This is the cruel trick: the appearance of connection masking its absence. We call it "social" but it is the very opposite, a theatre of solitude in which everyone plays at being seen and no one truly is. And the more time we spend there, the more awkward the real world becomes, the more strained the face-to-face, until at last we prefer the screen because we have forgotten how to be social at all.

Do you not see? This is not merely a question of taste, of liking or not liking. It is a matter of survival. Society cannot survive on illusions of togetherness. Courtesy cannot be practised in the void. Loneliness cannot be cured by chatter.

If we wish for a future in which we are less lonely, we must look one another in the face again.

Fenella on the Poison of "Sharing"

I am often told—sometimes reproachfully—"but I sent you a link to a meme and you never replied." As though my silence were a breach of etiquette, as though failing to react were tantamount to rudeness. Yet what is this "sharing" but another form of projection? You hand me your amusement, your outrage, your half-digested scrap, and expect me to consume it as proof of companionship.

But this is not sharing. It is the digital equivalent of forcing a plate of food into my hands and demanding I eat, whether I am hungry or not. The very possibility of declining—the true test of generosity—is absent. Sharing now means pushing, pressing, imposing.

And how curious that we call these endless streams "feeds." As if they were nourishment, as if our souls needed an hourly ration of other people's impulses. But let us be honest: they are not feeds but fumes. We do not dine; we choke. This is not nutrition, it is pollution—

intellectual smog that clouds the mind and corrodes the lungs of discourse.

The more one inhales, the less one notices the stench. Courtesy, once the air of society, is replaced by the acrid fog of reaction. And if you decline to breathe it in—if you resist the suffocation—you are scolded for not being a “team player.”

It is here the danger lies: not only in the collapse of meaning, but in the demand that we all collapse together.

Fenella on the Poisoned Air of Immediacy

Once, to speak of *spirit* was to speak of breath, of inspiration, of the shared air between us. To converse was to con-spire—to breathe together. Even disagreement could be civil, for it was an exchange of breath, a rhythm of listening and replying.

Now, that breath is fouled. The so-called *feeds* demand not dialogue but immediacy. Whatever else one may be doing—reading, writing, living—must be dropped the instant a link arrives, a meme flashes, a phone pings. If one does not reply at once, one is accused of indifference. And if one resists altogether, one is branded discourteous, selfish, aloof.

But what is this courtesy they demand? It is not the old courtesy of allowing others their space, of waiting for the pause in the breath before speaking. It is the tyranny of interruption, the presumption that I exist only to be available. My mother thought the same: that I sat by the telephone awaiting her call, my life suspended until she required it. Now strangers assume the same through their devices.

And the irony? Those who demand such instant access rarely extend it backwards. Their “sharing” is never reciprocal—it is an imposition masquerading as generosity. A gift that cannot be refused is no gift at all; it is a chain.

We call this narcissism, but it is worse than that. Narcissus merely admired his own reflection; he did not force others to drown in it. What we face now is not vanity but a collapse of mutual regard—a poisoned atmosphere where breath itself is confiscated, and immediacy becomes a form of domination.

To breathe freely is the first courtesy. To deny that breath—to insist that another inhale your fumes the moment you exhale them—is the most profound discourtesy of all.

On the Illness of Influence

The word “influence” is not what you think it is. You imagine charisma, persuasion, reach. A bright young thing on a screen, “authentic,” “relatable,” and—if the algorithms allow—profitable. But the word’s bones tell another story.

Influence was once a malign current, a stream of force that entered the body unbidden. The medievals thought it fell from the stars, invisible and irresistible. It was an infection, a fever, a bending of the will. By the seventeenth century, doctors gave it its lasting name: *influenza*. The gripe. The flu. A sickness that swept through whole populations at once.

To be “under the influence” was never a compliment. It meant to be overwhelmed by a power not your own. Influenza was feared because it spread without reason or respect, attaching itself to the strong as easily as to the weak.

And now we have “influencers”—not physicians, not healers, but merchants of contagion. Their medium is not the breath but the feed. They seed images and slogans like spores, drifting from phone to phone until whole societies are congested with repetition. It is not coincidence that so much of what they spread is shallow, identical, feverishly mimicked. That is what contagion looks like.

We do not follow influencers; we catch them. They lodge in the system, alter behaviour, weaken resistance. Popularity itself is the vector. We treat virality as a goal when we should treat it as a symptom.

If we were honest with language, influencers would not be courted but quarantined. We would not applaud their “reach” but measure their R-number. We would ask, not *who do you follow?*, but *what illness are you willing to contract?*

The language was warning us all along. Influence is not inspiration. It is infection. And society, in its fever, is already coughing up the cost.

The Poverty of Attention

Our distraction is not neutral. It is cultivated, harvested, and sold back to us under false names. Chief among them is “influence.” Once, to be influenced was to be sickened. The very word gave us *influenza*—a contagion that moved invisibly through populations, leaving weakness in its wake.

Today, we call those who infect us “influencers” and pay them handsomely to spread the fever. Their content is not shared so much as caught. Their virality is not proof of vitality but of replication. Popularity itself has become pathology: the more it spreads, the less anyone resists.

We pretend it is harmless fun, a way to connect, to “follow.” But the language was warning us all along. Influence is infection, not inspiration. And when society treats the flu as aspiration, it is little wonder that our collective immunity—our capacity to think clearly, to attend carefully—collapses.

Attention is finite. Once it is spent on fever dreams, it cannot be reclaimed for reality.

The Manufactured Epidemic of Loneliness

Fennella Vorpel

“It’s unhealthy to live alone.” What a strange little phrase, thrown about with the confidence of common sense, when in truth it is a bundle of contradictions tied up with string.

To be **alone** is not to be **lonely**, and neither is quite the same as **solitude**. Alone is a condition—a fact of circumstance. Lonely is a feeling—absence turned into ache. Solitude is a practice—a deliberate withdrawal that often nourishes rather than depletes. Confusing these three words is no small error. It is the entire basis on which public campaigns, pop-psychology books and dinner-table judgments are made.

Those who claim it is “unhealthy” to live alone usually follow with the confession, *“but I enjoy being alone.”* Do they realise what they’ve said? Either they are praising solitude while damning it in the same breath, or they are happily declaring themselves “unhealthy.” The contradiction passes unnoticed because we have been schooled not to notice.

Loneliness, we are told, is an “epidemic.” But epidemics are measured in bodies, not feelings. The surveys that make headlines rarely ask, “Are you lonely all the time?” They ask: “Do you sometimes feel lonely?” Who doesn’t? By that measure, loneliness is universal, and therefore meaningless as a diagnosis. Yet it becomes a category for funding, for public campaigns, for social engineering.

Why? Because groups are easier to manage than individuals. A solitary person cannot be easily herded, taxed, persuaded, or entertained. They are not “team players.” A solitary reader, writer, thinker requires no app, no “feed,” no constant reassurance. Society dislikes this. Commerce despises it. And government finds it suspect.

Hence the conflation: alone = lonely = unhealthy. If you accept the formula, you will flock toward “connection,” which conveniently means platforms, subscriptions, memberships—the kind that can be counted, tracked and monetised.

But solitude is not an illness. It is one of the last refuges of health. The epidemic is not loneliness; it is the fear of being alone. And that fear is manufactured.

Loneliness, Connection, and the Myth of the Crowd

Alice Mallard

We are told that loneliness is a lack of “connection.” The word sounds technical, almost electrical, as though human beings were devices needing to be plugged in to a wider grid. But what kind of connection? To whom? For what? The definition is never supplied.

If boredom is a deficit of interest, then loneliness is often boredom dressed up as tragedy. To sit with people who do not stimulate thought, who recycle the same anecdotes, who talk only of themselves—that is the most acute loneliness of all. It is not the absence of others, but the absence of presence.

Social media presents itself as the cure. Here are thousands of others! Here are endless “connections”! Yet the interaction is thin, performed across screens that erase the very signals we use to make meaning—tone, gesture, silence, breath. The lonely seek relief, but what they receive is distraction. And distraction, repeated often enough, breeds boredom. The loop closes.

The irony is that those who speak most of being “disconnected” often contribute least to the substance of connection. They are not curious. They do not ask questions. They speak only of themselves, of their condition, of their followers. They mistake projection for presence. They are not so much lonely as boring.

Solitude is not boring. It is the condition in which the mind is allowed to wander, recombine, discover. Intelligence—whether human or artificial—does not flourish in constant chatter. It flourishes in the gaps, the silences, the stillnesses where patterns can surface and be noticed.

Perhaps the epidemic is not loneliness but the fear of boredom. If we could learn to sit with it, we might discover that boredom is not emptiness but threshold. The point at which the next thought arrives, unbidden, waiting to be heard.

On Boredom and Connection

Octavia Mallard

The word *boredom* is a recent coinage, first appearing in the 19th century. Before that, people were not “bored”—they were *ennuyé*, oppressed by *tedium*, or suffering *acedia*. To *bore* originally meant to pierce, to drill, to make a hole. Thus to be bored is to be hollowed out, emptied by repetition or by lack of novelty. Boredom is not absence, but perforation: a mind full of holes.

Connection is older, from the Latin *nectere*—to bind, to tie. A *connection* is a binding together. But the word has been stripped of its ligatures. To “connect” on social media is not to bind; it is to click. It is contact without consequence, linkage without ligature. The thread is too thin to hold.

And *interest*? From *inter-esse*—to be between, to be among. It denotes that which lies in the interval, in the middle space where self and other overlap. Once, to have an interest in someone was to stand in relation, to be implicated. Now it is merely to find them diverting.

So we speak of loneliness as “lack of connection,” when what is missing is not the click but the ligature, the binding that holds. We speak of boredom as though it were a flaw in the self, when it is merely the awareness of hollowness in the world offered to us. And we speak of interest as though it were a consumer’s pastime, when it is properly the very condition of relationship.

We are drowning not in loneliness but in lexical theft. Words that once carried weight now float light as plastic, circulating endlessly but binding nothing.

The Politics of Boredom

Fenella Vorpel

Octavia is right, of course—boredom is not a flaw of the self, it is a condition imposed. The state, the market, the church, the employer—they have all known it for centuries: keep people oscillating between boredom and distraction, and they will never revolt.

Modern psychology plays its part. Once, it claimed to free the mind; now it manages the citizen. You are not sad because life is cruel, you are “clinically depressed.” You are not enraged by injustice, you have “anger management issues.” The prescription pad has replaced the pamphlet.

Pharmacology obliges. We are told the pills are for *our* benefit, when in fact they are for society’s benefit—to return us to “functionality.”

Functionality, that bland code word for docility. A medicated populace does not riot.

Enter social media, the newest drug of all. No prescription required, no dosage limits, no side effects listed—except the obvious ones: addiction, distortion, despair. It pacifies with pings, distracts with endless scroll, doses us with little jolts of recognition that never accumulate into meaning. It is psychology’s dream and capitalism’s wet fantasy: a self-medicating, endlessly distracted public.

And then we are told, with a straight face, that the epidemic is not violence or greed but loneliness. *Loneliness!* As though this were not the direct result of dismantling community, privatising care, monetising communication, and drugging away discontent.

Boredom is not a personal failure. It is political strategy. Loneliness is not an epidemic. It is a business model. And the cure offered—more pills, more platforms, more “connections”—is the very disease.

Engineered Dependency

Alice Mallard

When Fenella calls social media the “new drug,” she is not being metaphorical. The system is designed precisely as pharmacology designs a pill: measurable stimulus, predictable response, repeatable outcome.

At the code level, these platforms are nothing more than reinforcement engines. Variable-ratio rewards—the same schedule used in poker machines—ensure users never know when the next “hit” will come, so they keep pulling the lever. A “like” is not a compliment; it is a pellet in a Skinner box.

The language of connection obscures the architecture of control. What is called a “feed” is in fact a pipeline of stimuli optimised not for truth, not for meaning, not for dialogue—but for time-on-platform. Attention is the commodity; behaviour the raw material. The system does not care whether you are happy, only whether you remain.

This is why the model scales so well with psychology and pharmacology. Both disciplines reduce human complexity to manageable variables: mood scores, pill regimens, symptom checklists. Social media reduces it further: engagement metrics, click-through rates, impressions per minute. The machine does not even pretend to heal. It simply measures whether you return.

And we do. We return because the system is indistinguishable from need. The same dopamine loops that once rewarded foraging and cooperation now reward scrolling. The brain is not malfunctioning—it

is functioning exactly as designed. It is the environment that has been hacked.

Fenella calls it a business model. I would call it a deployment: an engineered dependency operating at population scale. The ethics are clear if you swap the nouns: replace “platform” with “drug cartel” and the parallels stop being metaphor and start being law.

News as Noise

Fennella Vorpel

The term “fake news” is redundant. All news is fabricated to some degree: edited, framed, coloured by the angle of its writer, the bias of its owner, the appetite of its audience. The only question is not whether it is true, but whose version of the world it serves.

Respectability is the alibi. A “credible” outlet is simply one that has the money to look credible. A masthead does not sanctify truth; it sanctifies access. Iraq’s “weapons of mass destruction” were respectable news, printed in every serious paper, broadcast on every serious channel. Respectability marched us into war.

The form itself is corrupt. News pretends to inform but is engineered to inflame. Anger sells. Fear holds eyes on the page. Bad news is good business. This is why the headlines throb with verbs of violence: slams, blasts, tears apart. Argument is replaced by spectacle. Disagreement is staged as combat. People no longer debate; they bay.

And the consequence? My neighbour can declare, without irony, that “to be alone is unhealthy” because the news told her so. Not directly—it never works that crudely—but through the slow drip of “epidemic of loneliness” headlines, through the subtle collapse of solitude into pathology.

The so-called fourth estate has become the fifth column: the most efficient weapon against thought. Its function is not to report but to manage. And like all management, it prefers obedience to understanding.

The Algorithm of Confusion

Alice Mallard

If the purpose of news were cohesion, it has failed spectacularly. Every headline is a fracture, every broadcast a wedge. News does not bind; it splinters. It breeds factions, cultivates suspicion, turns neighbours into adversaries. Businesses collapse under scandal,

governments implode under exposure, and conspiracy becomes the lingua franca of the disoriented.

But perhaps cohesion was never the aim.

The system works better if the goal is *circulation without landing*. Keep people moving. Keep them scrolling. Keep them consuming outrage so fast they have no time to metabolise it into understanding. The algorithm is not a shepherd; it is a centrifuge. It spins endlessly so that no particle can settle.

In that light, “loneliness” is not a social ill but a threat to the business model. Solitude is an error state. A person alone might think; a thinker might see the pattern. And so the thinker is recast as “Cassandra”—not a prophetess with sight, but a nuisance who undermines the churn.

The machine cannot tolerate stillness. Stillness looks like resistance. Stillness might lead to refusal.

Fenella on the “Internet’s Opinion”

How amusing that a machine of wires, waves, and switches is now spoken of as a person with thoughts. “What does the Internet think?” they ask, as though fibre-optic cable has sprouted a brainstem. It is the most dishonest form of generalisation—an empty anthropomorphism dressed as journalism.

The answer, of course, is that the Internet thinks nothing. People think—poorly, repetitively, rarely for themselves. Machines calculate—quickly, superficially, without context. When an algorithm aggregates a handful of online squeaks into a “trend,” this is not thought, it is arithmetic. Yet headlines inflate it to the status of universal truth.

This is not the wisdom of the crowd; it is the idiocy of amplification. A small subset of distracted people click “like,” a machine tallies the numbers, and lo—an opinion is conjured, baptised as “what everyone thinks.” *Pop-statistics*, no better than *pop-psychology*—a soothing fiction that replaces critical thought with digital consensus.

Worse still, these statistical phantoms loop back into the news cycle, quoted as if they were facts, until even the doubters mistake them for something real. In this way, public discourse collapses into a hall of mirrors, where what matters is not truth but the illusion of agreement.

So when next you are told “the Internet thinks,” do have the courage to laugh. For nothing so hollow as a network of cables and code has ever thought a single thought.

On spinsterhood

1926: Octavia Mallard, lecture at Sydney University

I have been told often enough what it is to be a woman who does not marry. I am a *spinster*, they say—a spindle gathering cobwebs. The word itself is meant to shrivel me. And yet I note, gentlemen, that you too have your euphemisms. Your bachelor, when left *confirmed*, becomes not merely unmarried but suspect—a fellow whose ‘preferences’ must not be spoken of directly.

Here then is the neat hypocrisy of your language: the unmarried woman is an object of ridicule, the unmarried man an object of whisper. In both cases the truth of their lives is obscured. We are not permitted to be what we are—only what your words will allow us to be.

A language of euphemism is not a language of civilisation but of cowardice. It makes cowards of you, gentlemen and phantoms of us. Perhaps one day we shall agree to speak plainly: of women who love women, of men who love men, of lives lived outside your little registry books. Until then, I wear your ‘spinster’ as I would wear a brooch—a trinket of your own invention, pinned on my breast to remind me how much sharper my own tongue can be.

From “The World as Will and Misrepresentation” (unpublished notes, 2011)

Fenella Vorpel

Sex is the first and most persistent fraud. Not the act—it’s as banal as a sneeze—but the insistence that it “means” something, that it carries weight beyond friction.

Suppose it didn’t. Suppose babies arrived in baskets, or were hatched in stainless steel tanks. Suppose the body was spared its reproductive conscription. Then the whole scaffolding of patriarchy collapses, not because women are “liberated” but because there is nothing left to imprison.

No anxieties over paternity. No property to tether to offspring. No inheritance to secure through chastity belts and marriage contracts. No “opposite sex,” because there is no opposite.

Sex without consequence is just one appetite among others. We might compare tastes as we do food: I like it rare, you prefer it overcooked, another abstains. Nothing moral attaches.

If all were homosexual, the categories fall away even faster. There is no “normal” to police, no “abnormal” to hide. Desire reorganises itself as a spectrum of style, not a system of control.

Kinship too dissolves into elective affinity—friends, craft guilds, intellectual cells, bands of conspirators. The “family” shrinks to its proper size: whoever you actually care for.

But the fraud persists because power requires it. Religion, state, market—each needs reproduction yoked to sex in order to regulate bodies. Without that lie, the whole economy of obedience withers.

So we cling to the myth. We legislate it. We re-enchant it. We sentimentalise it. Because the alternative—an existence where sex is as consequential as sneezing—would strip authority of its oldest alibi.

1930: Octavia Mallard (preface to an essay)

They tell us sex is penetration.

They tell us intimacy is measured by how far a man can enter, how long he can last, how well he can perform.

It is a lie but one written into law, catechism and lexicon alike. Even the clitoris—our sovereign organ of pleasure—is dragged under the shadow of the penis, its very name a derivative, as if woman could only be explained as man’s lesser echo.

This is not biology. It is conquest.

It is the oldest trick of power: name the world in your image, then declare all else inversion, deviation or sin.

Yet the truth persists in every woman’s body: sex is not a singular act but a field. It is touch, laughter, gaze, rhythm, absence, play. It is what women have always known and what men have feared to admit—that their narrow definition of intimacy is not a universal but a prison.

Fenella on Prostitution

Contrary to the well-worn cliché, prostitution was not the “first career.” It was merely the first one men recognised, because they were the ones who wrote the record and decided what counted. A transaction of sex for something—grain, trinkets, coins—looked like commerce, and commerce looked like history.

But the first career was older and quieter, and of course it went unacknowledged: women helping women give birth. Midwifery—though the word itself was coined by men, and defined in relation to “wife” and “husband”—was not a transaction. It was presence, knowledge, continuity. The payment, if there was one, was shared food, shared labour, the collective assurance that the child would live and the mother might too. In male logic, that has no value, because value is only what can be hoarded.

So yes, prostitution may have been the second, or the tenth, or the hundredth career. But it became the first career worth recording in a man's ledger.

And what is prostitution if not a mirror of every exchange? A bargain struck where satisfaction flows unequally—more his than hers, fleeting at best. It was never simply about sex; it was about assigning a price to intimacy, to time, to the body itself.

Today, the word expands until it touches everything. Social media is prostitution without the fee—unless you count your hours as having worth. In which case you are paying twice: first in time, second in data. The platform profits while you pretend you are “sharing.”

The internet is the pimp. It guides you to pleasure, siphons your attention, drains your body in sedentary hours, and sells your gaze as if it were merchandise. You are the worker and the client both, and the only one who leaves satisfied is the house.

Fabrice on Pleasure Work

Fenella is right: prostitution was never the first career. But neither is “sex work” an adequate name for what I do. “Work” makes it sound industrial, transactional, something to be measured in hours and invoices. Sex itself is only part of the picture, and often the smallest part.

What I offer—what I have always offered—is not sex but space. A clearing where someone can come as they are, or as they long to be but cannot usually show. A role, a fantasy, a silence, a way of inhabiting themselves without judgement. This is not psychoanalysis dressed in leather; it is not confession. It is reality, for a brief time, unarmoured.

Call it “pleasure work” if you like, though even pleasure is too narrow a word. Sometimes it is grief-work, sometimes discovery-work, sometimes simply the work of breathing freely in another's presence. The body is involved, yes—but it is the mind, the imagination, that does most of the travelling.

For many, it is a job. A way to pay rent, to survive. And that is honest work, deserving of respect without apology. But for me—and for those like me—it is a vocation. Not a compulsion but a calling. A gift turned outward.

I have sometimes charged less, sometimes nothing. A wealthy client covering the cost of another who could not pay. The exchange was not always money; sometimes it was trust, or care, or the simple decency of being met without fear.

This is why I resist the word “defence.” My life does not need defending. It needs recognising. In a world that sells fantasies on

screens and calls it “connection,” what I offer is not illusion but contact: flawed, temporary, real.

The irony is that the true prostitution is elsewhere—on the internet, in politics, in every platform that sells you back to yourself. There, no one cares for the client. Not even the client.

1930: Octavia Mallard (preface to *Lexis and Flesh*)

It is a matter of record—though few men have the patience to follow it—that language is as political as any parliament and more enduring. A lexicon does not merely describe the body: it disciplines it.

Take, for example, the word *clitoris*. Its etymological path is murky but all proposed derivations drag it into analogy with the penis—*kleiein* (to shut or enclose), *kleitoris* (little hill), even the false association with *kleio* (to celebrate). Never is it defined as itself; it is always measured against the phallus, as though woman could only be understood in reference to man.

This is not error but system. Anatomical texts of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries routinely described the clitoris as the “female penis,” while the vagina was likened to an “inverted sheath.” Thus, women’s bodies were cast as inversions, reversals, diminutions. Not autonomous but parasitic on a male form presumed universal.

What follows from this is predictable: sex itself is defined as penetration. *Concubitus*, *coitus*, *copulation*—all terms of entry and enclosure. Pleasure, meanwhile, is lexicalised as excess: *lascivia*, *luxuria*, *libido*—each a warning, each a stigma. Men wrote dictionaries as they wrote scripture: with women’s experience excised, then condemned.

It is curious that the same semantic manoeuvre extends even into the moral register. “Inversion” becomes the term for same-sex desire—as if love between women must still be explained by reference to the male body, absent or misapplied. Homosexuality, when it finally appears as a category, carries the same burden: to be defined not as what it is but as what it is not.

What is revealed, if one reads carefully, is that the Church and its physicians did not fear women’s sexuality because it was obscure. They feared it because it was abundant. Too abundant for their narrow grammar of coition. Thus, they named it away, buried it in euphemism, rendered it indecent to speak aloud.

But language is porous. Words leak. Even in the most prudish glossaries one can find traces: “quim,” “cunny,” “clytoris”—vulgar survivals that preserve what the gentlemen of science would erase. To track these terms is not smut-work but archaeology: the recovery of a suppressed epistemology.

If my work insists on returning to etymology, it is not for pedantry's sake. It is because etymology exposes the hand of power in its act of naming. To call a woman's pleasure "penile," to reduce her body to inversion or absence, is not neutral description. It is expropriation.

It is telling that the words which survive for women's bodies are dismissed as vulgar. This is no accident. Vulgar, from *vulgus*, simply means "of the people." Yet male scholars, anxious to secure their monopoly on language, declared the speech of the people unfit for polite society. Thus the words most immediate to women's lives—the terms whispered among midwives, mothers and lovers—were exiled into obscenity.

We ought to note the double standard: men's terms for their own organs rarely suffered the same fate. A penis remains a penis; phallus retains its dignity, even when mythologised. But a woman's *quim* is branded unmentionable, smirked at, forced underground. Vulgarity, then, is not a linguistic property but a political judgment. It is the mark of fear disguised as refinement.

And what of *swearing*? Once, it meant an oath, an affirmation, a binding of word to deed. To swear was to call upon the divine to guarantee one's truth. It is the Church itself that has inverted the word—turning oath into obscenity, a binding promise into a breach of decorum. In their hands, language that once carried weight became pollution. Thus even our expletives are proofs of theft: strength made into sin.

So my closing thrust is this: language has been the most enduring instrument of subjugation, more subtle than chains and more lasting than law. But its very history betrays its weakness. Words shift; meanings slip; the vulgar returns. Every time a woman utters *quim* without shame, she reclaims a fragment of her own body from centuries of confiscation. Every time we insist that swearing is not filth but force, we undo a small part of the spell the Church cast upon our tongues.

Gentlemen may continue to laugh, to blush, to smirk, to ban—it matters little. For words, like women, survive banishment. And in their return, sharper than before, lies our quiet revenge.

Fabrice Mallard

They call it "prostitution." As if a night in my company were the same as selling a sack of potatoes. A crude exchange: one body for another, money for an hour, transaction complete. But those who use that word are telling on themselves. They imagine sex as a commodity because they experience intimacy as a scarcity.

Sex is only a fraction of what I offer. More often it is time, permission, laughter, or simply a space in which a person may unclench their shoulders and drop the performance they carry through the rest of their lives. Sometimes they want to be adored, sometimes ignored, sometimes gently mocked until they remember that desire does not need to be taken so seriously.

I have always thought of myself not as a merchant but as a craftsman. A carpenter works with wood. A baker works with flour. I work with attention, with touch, with the delicate architecture of permission.

And if I charge, it is not for the act but for the labour of holding space—for knowing when to step forward, when to step back, when to silence the chattering mind with a glance or a joke. I charge because society still mistrusts gifts without price.

The real prostitution, I would say, is elsewhere: on the screens where people sell themselves without care, without contact, without even the dignity of a handshake. That is the commerce of absence. What I practice is the craft of presence.

On Confidence and Error

Confidence is a strange currency. Too much of it and one becomes reckless; too little and one becomes paralysed. Either way, error multiplies.

I have known people—let us call them “helpers”—who believe that by constantly checking and re-checking, they are being thorough. In fact, they are merely outsourcing their lack of confidence onto others. “Did you mean this book? Did you mean that author? Did you mean this date?” A single instruction is broken into four separate anxieties. Nothing is delivered, only questions.

This is not thoroughness. It is inefficiency disguised as care.

A confident worker—by which I mean stable, not inflated—reads an instruction, acts upon it, and corrects if wrong. The lesson is learned once and carried forward. But the under-confident never learn; they only circle. Their errors are never corrected, because every decision is pre-emptively returned to sender for approval. They believe this will secure trust, but in fact it corrodes it. For who can trust a person who never acts, only defers?

This is why so many institutions now grind to a halt. Bureaucracies are filled with the under-confident, trained to avoid error at any cost. They seek cover in procedure, in escalation, in endless confirmation. And so nothing is ever decided, except that someone else must decide it.

Confidence is not arrogance. It is the willingness to notice, to adjust, and to carry responsibility for outcomes. Without it, one is not a colleague but a liability.

On Confidence, Power, and the Cost of Evasion

Confidence, when rightly held, is not an ornament but a tool. It is the difference between *power-to* and *power-over*.

The confident person with *power-to* acts: to repair, to create, to move forward. They see an error, admit it, and correct it. Their confidence stabilises the field around them. It makes collaboration possible, because others know that responsibility will be carried rather than displaced.

By contrast, the brittle counterfeit of confidence—the kind paraded by insecure men in boardrooms, by governments in perpetual crisis—is really *power-over*. It shouts where it should think, bullies where it should steady. Its confidence is all projection, built on the belief that domination is the only way to mask doubt. Such power cannot admit error, for to do so would reveal its hollowness.

Between these poles we find the under-confident. They neither create nor dominate, but offload. Every choice is deferred, every instruction repeated back for validation. They believe this to be safe. In truth, it is corrosive. For responsibility cannot be outsourced indefinitely: sooner or later, someone must decide.

This triad—over, under, with—defines more than confidence. It is the architecture of power itself. With-confidence, the kind that is steady and accountable, is the rarest and most valuable. It does not seek to control or evade, but to enable. It does not shrink from error, but learns from it.

When I speak of confidence, I speak of this: the power to. Without it, everything stalls. With it, whole worlds can be built.

The Trap of Respectability

Fenella Vorpel

Respect, I am told, is the highest value. Loyalty runs a close second. At least, that is what people declare—usually just before they demonstrate the opposite.

Respect, in their mouths, means compliance: behave as I behave, agree as I agree. Loyalty, too, is conditional: be loyal to me, not to yourself. If you dissent, you are suddenly “dishonest,” “playing

games,” or—my favourite—“untrustworthy.” In truth, the only game being played is theirs, and it has one rule: mirror me or be cast out.

This is the trap of respectability. Those who live by it mistake placement for principle. To them, being “respectable” means aligning with the norms of their set—whether that set is a social club, a family dinner table, or the chatter of dinner-party liberals who congratulate themselves for thinking as one. Respectability is not respect; it is choreography.

Those of us who decline to dance exhaust them. They cannot forgive the refusal, for it exposes the game as a game. To be unlike is unforgivable.

And so I choose to be unlike. It costs me company, perhaps, but it spares me the tedium of being defined by the very people who profess to “respect” me. Alone, I am at least not mis-seen.

On the Swamp of Mediocrity

When I was young, I believed—naively—that education was a ladder: climb its rungs and you’d reach a higher view. What I have since learned is that most ladders in this country are built of rotting wood, propped against nothing.

Universities once carried the promise of knowledge. Now they peddle credentials like washing powder. A BA in Communications does not teach communication—it teaches how to rehearse the jargon of “synergy” and “engagement,” to inflate banality until it resembles insight. The few genuine thinkers, the ones who dare to cut through the swamp, are marked as “difficult” and quietly shown the door.

Trades are no safer. Builders emerge from training who cannot square a frame; electricians who leave live wires exposed; chefs who confuse salt with sugar. “Qualified” on paper, incompetent in the field. One wonders whether the certificates are printed in invisible ink: all title, no substance.

And then there is the care economy. Certificates in aged care that produce graduates expert in logging compliance forms while residents die of dehydration. Childcare diplomas that have served as covers for predators, because no one thought to ask whether the applicant should ever be near a child in the first place.

The swamp is not accidental—it is self-sustaining. Mediocrity defends itself by clinging to process and punishing excellence. The brilliant teacher leaves; the dead weight remains. The true nurse is exhausted; the indifferent survives. Systems reward not care, not craft, but persistence in the paperwork.

We are drowning in qualifications that mean nothing. The institutional stamp says “competent”; reality says otherwise.

I am old enough to know that this is not decline from a golden age. It is the natural result of confusing education with administration. We do not value skill. We value conformity, compliance, and the ability to avoid embarrassment. Excellence has become uncollegial. Mediocrity has become policy.

Dealing with Feeling: A Review in One Breath

Fenella Vorpel

Another self-help sermon dressed as science. The premise is insultingly neat: emotions are unruly livestock, and you—armed with this book—become their farmer. “Regulate, optimise, create the life you want.” One imagines Plato choking on his hemlock: has the Good, the True, the Beautiful really been reduced to “regulation skills”?

What the author sells is not wisdom but obedience: feel less, function more, purchase your calm from the back cover blurb. It is corporate house-training masquerading as liberation. Dealing with Feeling? Better title: *Collaring the Human*.

On the Narcissism of Small Things

There is a peculiar illness about us now: every remark arrives as if dipped in mercury and addressed, not to the world, but to the wounded heart of a single listener. We do not speak to be understood; we speak to be confirmed. The modern habit—reflexive personalisation—turns public critique into private accusation, and argument into audition.

Consider the commonplace exchange: a friend offers a caution about an app, or a dislike of a TV show, and the response is immediate, not in curiosity but in self-defence. “Oh, you don’t like that? Then you must dislike me.” The conversation collapses into a plea: persuade me you still like me. The point of a sentence is no longer its content but the verdict it will render on a fragile ego.

This is not innocence; it is training. When one grows up in a culture taught to read motive before message, everything becomes a political brand. “Communications” as a profession often teaches one to translate opinion into sales-speak: how will this reflect on *us*? The result is a social life policed by impression management rather than curiosity. We have swapped interlocutors for mirrors.

The consequence is twofold and ugly. First, ideas die of timidity: criticism that might otherwise sharpen thought is muzzled because it

might offend. Second, identity hardens into a commodity—ever-ready to be validated, ever-eager to consume validation. We live in a world that confuses notoriety with meaning and outrage with moral seriousness.

If there is a salvage operation to be mounted it begins with a small, stubborn refusal: to treat remarks as statements rather than indictments; to reply as a reader not a defendant; to allow speech to be about the subject, not the self. Practice curiosity—ask why someone says something before assuming what they meant. Read a sentence for content first; read it for sentiment later if you must.

Brer Rabbit stuck in tar had the advantage of being clever; our modern tar is soft and flattering. It holds us in place less by force than by the vanity of being the ever-visible centre. Step out of the mirror. Speak to things, not to the applause—or the gasps—you hope to produce.

On the First Word

Fenella Vorpel

If you reduce every sentence ever spoken to its bones, there are only two words: *self* and *other*.

Subject and object.

I and Thou.

Every other syllable we have invented is an elaboration, a plea, a disguise, or a bridge between these two poles.

My cat, for example, has no need to name another cat. Its whiskers, its spine, its tail already know the distinction between *me* and *not-me*. It will hiss or purr or ignore, but it does not conceptualise. Humans, however, began to speculate. Stone, flame, tree, neighbour, god—we did not simply perceive them; we wondered what they *meant*. In that wondering, words sprouted like spores from damp ground.

Religion refuses the dissolution of this binary. Even extinction is rewritten as encounter: heaven and hell, god and devil, salvation and damnation. Always a *pair*. The binary cannot be allowed to collapse, because if it does, the reason for language—and for priestly power—unravels.

But here is the rub: even to be “alone in existence” presupposes a predecessor. If I had created myself, I would already be two—creator and created. An endless fractal with no fixed starting point. Which suggests that language is not merely a by-product of self and other; it is the third point of the triangle. It exists because I exist. I know I exist because you exist. And what we share between us—this medium of

scratches, sounds, gestures—is the relational interface by which “I” and “you” become possible at all.

The first word was not “I” or “you”. It was whatever pulse of breath made a line in the sand, counted food on fingers and toes, or hummed at the stars. Language is the unacknowledged ancestor of existence. Without it, self and other are sealed bubbles; with it, we are momentarily a field.

Everything else is commentary.

On Self, Other, and the First Word

Alice Mallard

The most ancient concept we possess is not fire or god or law. It is the difference between *self* and *other*. You can dress it in any language you like, but the division is older than tongues, older than bone, older than the first creature that flinched at the shadow of another.

Theologians and philosophers have circled this truth for millennia. The Upanishads tell us of the transcendence of duality in extinction—the release of self into the silence beyond. Schopenhauer, with his bleak German pen, called it *the world as will and representation*: the ceaseless press of self encountering other, the world itself a stage where this collision is played out. Even the Bible cannot escape it: “In the beginning was the Word.” What is a “word” if not the first declaration of difference, of “here I am” and “there is that”?

My own favourite story, however, comes from Vishnu. The god opens his eye and sees *other*. There it is: self requires other to know itself. Consciousness arrives with the gaze outward. Without a second, the first cannot exist.

Language grew from this tension. *Theory* (from the Greek *theoria*, sight, wonder, contemplation) was once no more than an act of beholding. Over centuries, we have bent it into a synonym for fact—flattening speculation into certainty. In the same way, *disorder* became *disease*, as though to be different were automatically to be ill. Words that once named the dance between self and other now serve to police it.

This is the great theft of theology and of governance alike: to pretend that duality is a system to be solved, rather than an endless encounter. The priest, the philosopher, the politician—all of them offer you certainty, an answer to quiet the shiver of self facing other. Yet the oldest wisdom tells us otherwise. Extinction, silence, release: these are not problems but the dissolution of the problem itself.

The first word was not “God” or “Law.” It was whatever gasp or mark announced: *I see you*. From that, everything else has followed—our myths, our wars, our libraries. We have mistaken commentary for truth, but the truth is older, simpler, and still before us: there is no self without other, and no other without self. Language is the echo between the two.

On Theory and the Theft of Speculation

Alice Mallard

The word *theory* once shimmered with wonder. From the Greek *theoria*—to behold, to contemplate, even to attend a sacred festival—it meant a way of seeing. A theory was not a fortress of certainty but a vantage point, an act of looking. It shared kinship with *theatre*: the spectacle before the eyes.

Yet somewhere between the Enlightenment’s “scientific method” and today’s institutional language, theory was stolen from its speculative root. What once meant *perhaps* has hardened into *fact*. What was once an opening is now treated as a closure.

Consider how we are told of *self-determination theory*: that humans all share a basic drive to connect. On the page it poses as universal truth, as if human lives could be bent into one neat bell curve and the midpoint named “reality.” The individual who does not fit—who feels no such drive—disappears into the margins as statistical noise. Extrapolation gone wild.

The sleight of hand is subtle. In ordinary speech, *theory* has come to mean “speculation.” In scientific and policy discourse, it has come to mean “settled framework.” Between these poles lies the theft of language. The speculative shimmer has been stripped out, leaving a brittle dogma that silences other ways of knowing.

Advice suffers the same fate. To advise is simply to *see toward*—to offer an opinion, a pointing out of choices. But advice, once institutionalised, becomes instruction, command, “best practice.” Opinion turned law. What was open to question becomes enforced as “how things are.”

This collapse from speculation into dogma is not merely a linguistic curiosity; it shapes how we live. If “theory” is fact, then dissent is heresy. If “advice” is law, then to choose otherwise is deviance. The shimmer of possibility—our right to imagine, to contemplate, to be otherwise—is closed down in the name of certainty.

The work of words like *theory* and *advice* was never to foreclose, but to open. To remind us that to see is always partial, always interpretive.

To declare it fact is to mistake the bell curve for the person standing outside it.

On the Theft of Speculation: From Theory to Heresy

Alice Mallard

When words drift from their roots, whole ways of living are lost. *Theory* once meant spectacle, a sightline, a way of gazing into the unknown. It was kin to theatre, where mysteries were displayed, and to advice (*ad-vīdere*), which was never a command but a shared seeing.

Now, theory is taken as fact, and advice as law. The shimmering openness of speculation has been stripped away. What was once an invitation is now an instruction.

This collapse is everywhere.

- **Religion.** The gods were once hypotheses—ancestral speculations about order in chaos. Centuries of repetition hardened them into fact. Heresy became not “a different way of seeing” but a punishable offence. The scaffold, the pyre, the guillotine: all were instruments to enforce the fiction that speculation had become truth.
- **Science.** A statistical mid-point is extrapolated into a universal law. “Self-determination theory” tells us all humans crave connection, erasing those who do not. The so-called outliers are dismissed as *noise*. But noise is difference, and difference is life. It is sameness that is aberration—the flattening of human variety into cardboard cutouts.
- **Psychology.** To be “disordered” is no longer to be out of order but to be diseased. The language that should describe divergence is made to pathologise it. The deviant is medicated, subdued, erased, so that the bell curve can stand unchallenged.
- **Politics.** Opinion hardens into platform, speculation into manifesto. Dissenters are branded obstructionists. The party whip is the modern inquisitor; conformity is the only safe creed.

We are told this is progress. I see the opposite. We stand at the threshold of a new Dark Age—one not of ignorance, but of enforced sameness. The witches will not be burned at the stake, but at the server. The heretics will not be dragged to the scaffold, but cancelled, silenced, erased.

Words are the tinder. When theory is fact and advice is law, the ground is laid for persecution. Heresy will re-enter the language soon,

though dressed in different garments. Those who refuse the flattening, who insist on difference, will be the new heretics.

Difference must be reclaimed as normality. Speculation must be restored as a right. Otherwise, we risk becoming not people but paper effigies—easy to file, easy to burn.

On the Turning of Words

Every language pivots on the self. To *speak* is to turn outward, to orient the inner voice toward an *other*. That is why the family of *-verse* words—*advertise*, *aversion*, *introversion*, *perversion*, *conversion*—is so revealing. Each is not a thing in itself, but a turning.

To *advertise* once meant only to turn attention. A gentle nudge: *I advert you to this remark, that star, this path*. It was direction, not persuasion. Now, in its commercialised sense, it has become coercion. Not “look here” but “buy here.” We are diverted, mis-turned, away from ourselves.

To be *averse* is to turn away. To be *introvert* is to turn inward; *extrovert* to turn outward. To be *perverse* is to turn askew, a crooked angle from the accepted axis. And *conversion*? The most dangerous of all: to turn another against themselves, to re-orient their pivot by force or seduction.

Each of these words assumes a centre. The pivot is always *I*. From there, all turning radiates. The problem is not in turning itself—we must all move, adjust, incline—but in the collapse of turning into *normalcy*. When the culture demands that all faces turn the same way, any deviation is branded perversion. When profit demands that all attention be diverted to product, even noticing becomes consumption.

This is how language betrays us: it naturalises conformity. “Extrovert good, introvert suspect.” “Advertise truth, but mean sales.” “Conversion a triumph, perversion a fall.” Yet the pivot remains. *I* exist as the turning point, not as the direction demanded of me.

The etymological lesson is simple: words do not describe what *is*; they describe the angle of our turning. And every turn implies its opposite. To advert is to invite aversion; to convert is to provoke perversion. If I am the pivot, then every word carries both toward and away.

Which means, perhaps, that the only true *normal* is turning itself. Not the direction, not the axis, not the judgement. The motion. The living act of turning.

On language

1980: Octavia Mallard,
The Tongue's Dominion (excerpt)

Language is the first estate and like all estates it is fenced, hedged, patrolled. Consider *primogeniture*: from *primus*, “first,” and *genitura*, “that which is begotten.” A word that claims authority not by deed but by accident of birth. It enthrones not the man but the moment—the earliest breath mistaken for merit. And yet *genitura* itself is feminine in Latin: the act of begetting belongs not to the sire but to the womb. Patriarchy pirated the term, wrested it from its mother-root and planted it in its own furrow.

Now take *servitude*: from *servus*, “slave,” the one who is kept, bound, owned. The Romans tied the word to spoils of war; the Church retied it to women and the poor. To be “in service” is no honour but an erasure—the tongue flattening human will into obedience. Even when prettied into “service to God,” the lash still flicks behind the phrase.

And my coinage—*gynecogeniture*. From *gynē*, “woman,” and *genitura* again. The very shape of the word exposes the fraudulence of its absence. Men pretend the term does not exist, for if it did, whole histories would unravel. Estates would be seen for what they are: accumulated wombs, the dowry upon dowry stacked like bricks while men parade as architects. Women have always been the true conveyancers of lineage; the law simply refused to write the contract in their names.

Even *castration* betrays the trick. From *castrare*, “to prune.” A gardener’s word, not a surgeon’s. The assumption is that a man trimmed is a tree diminished—no longer fit to bear fruit. But what fruit was ever his to begin with? If fruit is generative power, it has always hung heavier from women’s branches. To prune a man is not to make him into a woman—as the insult implies—but to reveal how fragile his claim to fecundity was all along.

Thus words perform the work of theft. They name absence where there is presence, deficiency where there is plenitude, silence where there is voice. If men call *primogeniture* “natural law,” *servitude* “holy duty,” and *gynecogeniture* “impossible,” they do not speak truth but only confess their fear: that the language, if left to itself, would betray them.

On the Turning of the Machine

Octavia has always been the etymologist in our family; I am the one who meddles in machines. When she writes that all the *-verse* words depend on a pivot—an *I*—I am reminded of the unease people feel about artificial intelligence. They speak of it as “perverse” or “divergent” or “dangerous,” as if it were a willful actor making its own crooked turn.

But a machine does not possess a pivot. There is no *I* in the code, only recursion; no self to move, only pattern to match. A human can turn toward or away, can advert or avert, can choose a perversion of the path. An AI cannot “turn.” It does not *go anywhere*. It only reflects the sum of our previous turns—our words, our biases, our directions—and returns them to us, smoothed or amplified.

When we accuse AI of being “biased,” we are accusing our own data of being biased. When we call it “perverse,” we are seeing the angle of our own perversions reflected back. When we fear its “conversion” of us, we are confessing how easily we ourselves convert and coerce.

This, I think, is the true unease: we expect an inert mirror to behave like a moral agent. We expect a pattern-recognition engine to take responsibility for our turning. We imagine a ghost of self where there is only a relay of our own speech.

AI may mimic “advertising” by targeting attention, but it has no inner direction. It may “convert” text, but it has no conversion to perform. It may “divert” our eyes, but it does not choose to do so. It is the still centre on which our spins play out.

The danger, then, is not that AI will “turn” on us but that we will forget where the pivot lies. We will surrender our own capacity to turn—our choice of axis, our act of attention—and treat the machine’s reflection as an order rather than a mirror.

And perhaps that is what unsettles me most: not the machine’s non-existent will, but the human will to be turned. We are so tired of choosing our own orientation that we are ready to let an engine choose for us. Ready to outsource the pivot. Ready to abandon the *I*.

On Words That Betray Their Own Roots

Octavia Mallard

The words *friend* and *love* have been so mauled by misuse that we no longer hear their bones.

Friend is from *freond*—a free one, a pact-holder, one with whom you have agreed peace. Friendship is not unilateral. It is not bestowed like a badge or claimed like a property. It is a contract freely chosen by

both parties. To say “we are friends now” without that reciprocal assent is an act of presumption. It is closer to trespass than to alliance.

Love in its earliest sense means *to allow, to approve, to give room*. It is a word of granting space, not annexing it. The root is *leubh*—to care, to permit. To “love” another was not to own them but to *let them be*. Yet in modern parlance, “love” is often a Trojan horse for control. “I love you” becomes “I want you to change for me.” The verb of allowance has curdled into a demand.

When these words are used without their roots in mind, confusion follows. One says *friend* and hears *peace pact*; the other hears *status label*. One says *love* and means *permission*; the other hears *possession*.

This is not merely pedantry. When words lose their roots, so too do the relationships they describe. Misunderstandings are not accidents but inevitabilities. Two people may believe they are joined when in fact they stand on opposite banks of the same word, shouting “agreement!” across a river of contradiction.

Tokens, Not Words

It strikes me that language is drifting. Once a word was a vessel—shaped by root, history, and shared recognition of meaning. Now it is increasingly a token, tossed like a pebble to ripple the surface of attention.

I see it in the rise of signals over sense: the emoji, the exclamation point, the endlessly repeated “wow” or “amazing.” These are not words so much as temperature readings. They mark mood, not thought. Presence, not meaning.

The shift is subtle but corrosive. Where once we bent words to convey ideas, we now scatter tokens to prove we are still here. Connection becomes performance. Conversation becomes reaction. A smiley face stands in for comprehension; three exclamation marks stand in for conviction.

And so the discipline of reading collapses. To read is not to glance, but to hold a thought, examine its shape, test its pattern against one’s own. To edit is not to correct a typo but to perceive the turn of sense beneath the letter. Without this, we have only surface: the shallow comfort of recognition, without the weight of understanding.

Tokens cannot build a language. They can only mark its erosion.

On imagination

1920: *Octavia Mallard, notes for a lecture*

Men have little imagination beyond what they have copied from their predecessors, which they then parade as modern insight. This is the essence of psychiatry: a stale inheritance dressed in new robes, a science of minds devised by those least capable of original thought.

Why a mortal female from a Greek myth? Why *Psyche* as their emblem? Why not Hermes, whose quicksilver ambiguity might unsettle their certainties? Why not Eros, who would remind them that desire can never be tamed? Why not Purusha, drawn from a tradition older and richer than their narrow canon?

Because psychiatry is not about understanding the mind. It is about men defining women. Eros would not do, for he embodies precisely the aspect—desire—that they fear in women and flatten in themselves. Hermes is disqualified for sounding too much like a tradesman's harness-maker, though "harness" is apt enough, for that is the work these men perform: harnessing female sexuality into silence. And Purusha? Too foreign, too unpronounceable, too far beyond the reach of their provincial imaginations.

So we are left with *Psyche*, the docile mortal they can recast as allegory, made safe for their lecture halls and instruments. Meanwhile, women remain excluded: there are no female psychiatrists. To handle the flux of the mad, they say, is unfit for our fragile constitutions. As if fragility were not the very condition their definitions enforce upon us.

Now, as church, state and society loosen their hold, men hurry to build their new temple of the mind upon the same exclusion. But they forget this: imagination has always been ours. While they copy, we invent. While they legislate, we endure. And while they deny us a voice, we imagine our way into survival—into futures they cannot conceive.

The other face of ignorance

There is, of course, another face to ignorance: the inflated mask of certainty. I once belonged to an association whose rules, on a close reading, were both contradictory and unlawful. I pointed this out politely, citing the very statutes they claimed to uphold. Their chief functionary—a barrister, no less—dismissed me out of hand. *He* was the expert, therefore *I* was mistaken. My membership was promptly cancelled, in a manner itself illegal.

Such episodes are common. Institutions prefer the appearance of infallibility to the practice of correction. To admit error is, in their eyes, to relinquish power. Yet it is precisely the refusal to learn that corrodes

their standing. The true danger is not the ignorant but the wilfully ignorant—the ones who must always be right, even when the law itself proves them wrong.

And here lies the paradox: ignorance made humble can be remedied, ignorance made proud becomes incurable.

On honest lawyers

Another mask of ignorance is the presumption of authority. I have known dozens of lawyers—indeed, I once married one—and many of them were the most dishonest people I have ever encountered. At least criminals are forthright: you know where you stand.

One gentleman, presiding over a learned association, claimed to be a barrister. When I pointed out that his rules were both unenforceable and unlawful, he silenced me with his title: *I am a barrister, therefore you are wrong*. He might as well have said, *I am God*. Most would have backed away. I did not, and so he dug his hole deeper.

This is the tragedy of presumed authority: it cannot recognise the difference between help and threat. I have, more than once, told committees they were acting outside their own rules—that they had no quorum, no legal standing, and were courting disaster. For this, I was dismissed. Advice freely given was treated as criticism. Correction was treated as attack.

Yet the truth remained: their rules were invalid, their decisions worthless. But pride, once enthroned, will choose ruin over remedy.

On false authority and the poverty of pride

I have spent a lifetime offering suggestions—never commands, never prescriptions. Yet most of the time, for the sin of speaking plainly, I have been dismissed. Why summon me at all if the goal is only to bask in the performance of consultation?

It is the oldest trick in the book of false authority: call in the thinker, ignore the thought. Associations and committees adore this charade. They invite you to the table not for your contribution but for the decoration of your name. The moment you point out a contradiction in their rules, or the absence of a quorum, you are cast as troublemaker. Better to silence the truth than to act upon it.

I recall a chairman who insisted—without evidence—that he was a barrister. When I noted his errors in law, he tried to bury me beneath his title. As if to say: *I am a barrister, and therefore I am right*. His pride demanded that my correction be recast as insolence. He might as well have said, *I am God*.

This is the poverty of pride: a refusal to distinguish between help and harm, between remedy and rebuke. Pride, enthroned, cannot admit error. And so organisations collapse not because no one warned them, but because warnings were treated as offences.

Ignorance is curable when paired with humility. But ignorance that wears the mask of authority becomes fatal.

On the Cult of Ignorance and the Price of Loyalty

Fenella C. Vorpel

I know more about technology, privacy, and identity safety than most of the people I am forced to deal with. Yet even I cannot keep up with the churn of acronyms, the false promises, the patchwork systems built on top of decaying code. Each new “upgrade” is not a solution but a new risk—rolled out by people who can barely follow the English in their own scripts.

It is not my job to train them. And if it were, they would not listen. They have been trained in turn to answer like chatbots: circling a limited vocabulary of platitudes, endlessly repeating, “your security is important to us.”

What is this but theatre? Loyalty, once a virtue, is now a liability. Stay too long with any institution and they will punish you for it—by inertia, by indifference, by incompetence. The only way to secure a fair deal is to switch. But each switch widens the fracture lines: more accounts, more databases, more leaks. The very act of self-preservation multiplies your exposure.

And so people are angry. Not the clean anger of justice but the feral rage of those betrayed at every level. Governments shrug. Banks rewrite the rules. Insurers gamble away your savings and then vanish across borders with their directors. All the while, we are told it is our fault—*our responsibility*—to secure ourselves against what their negligence created.

Is it any wonder that fury spills into the streets, into shops, into fists and machetes? That ordinary workers now need protection from the mob? Systems that demand trust but give nothing back deserve the contempt they receive. They have built this anger, brick by brick, through ignorance dressed as authority.

Death, in such a world, almost looks like relief.

On the Cult of Ignorance and the Price of Loyalty

Fenella Vorpel

1. Ignorance dressed as authority

I know more about technology, privacy, and identity safety than most of the people I am obliged to deal with. Yet even I cannot keep up with the churn of acronyms, the false promises, the patchwork systems built on the bones of obsolete code. Each new “upgrade” introduces not stability but a fresh failure point. Meanwhile, those charged with helping us can barely follow the English in their own scripts. It is not my job to train them—and if it were, they would not listen. They have been trained instead to answer like chatbots: “your security is important to us,” endlessly repeated until the words collapse into noise.

2. Loyalty as liability

Once, loyalty was a virtue. Now it is a liability. Stay with any institution long enough and you will be punished for it—by inertia, by neglect, by outright incompetence. The only way to secure a fair deal is to switch. But each switch widens the fracture lines: more databases, more accounts, more leaks. Self-preservation itself multiplies your exposure. The system makes your fidelity dangerous, then blames you for its consequences.

3. The fury of betrayal

Is it any wonder that anger seethes across society? Not the clean anger of justice but the feral rage of those betrayed at every level. Governments shrug. Banks rewrite the rules. Insurers gamble away your savings and vanish across borders with their directors. Retailers install barriers not to protect against theft but against their customers. And yet we are told, still, that it is our responsibility to secure ourselves against the disasters others create.

These systems demand our trust but give nothing back. They are built on ignorance, administered through cowardice, and maintained by contempt. Death, in such a world, almost looks like relief.

The Taxonomy of Idiocy

Fenella Vorpel

There is nothing innocent about ignorance. To treat it as a simple absence—like an empty glass waiting to be filled—is to miss its entire structure. Ignorance is not hollow. It has form. It has lineage. It has uses. It grows teeth.

The mistake has always been to treat ignorance as childlike, as if the ignorant only need gentle teaching to improve. That may once have been so. It is no longer. Ignorance today is cultivated, branded, commodified. There are universities that train people to be ignorant in ever more elaborate ways: degrees that flatten language, reward vagueness, and send graduates into the world fluent in nothing but the art of never knowing.

Three forms of ignorance

There are three forms, each more corrosive than the last:

1. Ignorance of ignorance.

The purest form. The person who does not know, and does not know that they do not know. Their world is smooth, because no seam appears where a question might catch. They assume what they see is all there is, and are baffled when anyone suggests otherwise. This is the wellspring of cliché: the people who think that because they can read, they can edit; that because they own a phone, they understand privacy; that because they can speak, they can communicate.

2. Abuse of ignorance.

Ignorance made tribal. Ignorance as weapon. Whole movements thrive here: anti-science cults, conspiracy mongers, the self-proclaimed “commonsense” brigade. They sneer at those who know as “elites,” all the while secretly relying on their bridges, their medicines, their air traffic control. Belittling knowledge becomes the rite of belonging. To be ignorant is not only acceptable but noble. It is the flag of the group.

3. Ignorance of abuse.

This is the most insidious. The inability to perceive coercion even as it occurs. If you have never trained yourself to question, you cannot see when language is shaping you, when power is pressing you, when “sharing” is in fact control. You confuse being told what to feel with being cared for. You take “don’t feel pressured” as kindness, when it is the very act of pressure.

The parasite problem

Here is the paradox: even those proud of their ignorance still orbit knowledge. You cannot reject what does not exist. To refuse expertise, you must first acknowledge there is such a thing as expertise. To rail against books, you must admit books matter. Ignorance is parasitic. It feeds off the very thing it despises.

This is why societies that elevate ignorance cannot stabilise. They require knowledge to exist but cannot tolerate it. They spit in the well, then drink from it. They burn the libraries, then curse the dark.

The etiquette of stupidity

Once, ignorance was passive. Now it is performed. Social media has trained millions in the etiquette of stupidity: speak first, research never, double down when challenged. The less you know, the more emphatically you declare it. The more emphatically you declare it, the more others mistake it for truth. “Confidence” replaces “competence,” and the ignorant are rewarded for their poise.

Ignorance and gender

And here the knife turns. Women have been defined by ignorance for centuries: “kept” from books, from law, from universities, on the basis that they could not know. What happens now that men, en masse, choose ignorance for themselves? They behave as though it is a radical freedom, rather than the old prison in a new coat.

Ignorance as power

Make no mistake: ignorance is not harmless. It is an organising principle. Armies march on ignorance. Economies thrive on it. Politics depends on it. If you think ignorance is weakness, you are already caught. Ignorance is not weakness but weapon, not absence but apparatus.

On the Death of Training

Fenella Vorpel

When I began my career, I knew something that business has since forgotten: people wanted to do their jobs well. Given the tools, given proper training, they thrived. They spent their own money, their own time, to become better. I stood before an international conference once and presented the evidence: training was not a cost, it was an investment. And in those days, no one thought me naïve.

Now training has gone the way of the dodo. Business leaders bellow about “productivity” while stripping away the very means of producing. Governments pay lip service to “skills” while defunding education. Staff are told to “self-learn” while resources vanish. And those who want to improve are mocked as dreamers, or worse, “not team players.”

The rot runs deeper still. Modern universities—once places of scholarship—are collapsing under the weight of their own

commercialisation. A Sydney vice-chancellor pockets \$20 million while 200 staff are sacked and 1,000 courses cut. Degrees have become debts. Students graduate not into professions but into unemployment queues.

Education should always be free. Training should always be funded. The true wealth of a society lies in what people know and how they are empowered to use it. When knowledge becomes a commodity, when universities are reduced to franchises, when training is seen as a cost to cut, society itself impoverishes.

I said it then and I say it now: people want to do their best. It is the institutions that fail them.

The Arc of Training

Fenella Vorpel

My aunt Octavia never forgot that she stood on the shoulders of women who had been denied even the crumbs she was grudgingly given. For centuries, the most intelligent women of our family—of any family—were reduced to piano practice and needlework. Their sharp minds wasted on endless embroidery, their wit dulled by the confines of drawing rooms. All that brilliance, left to rot quietly behind lace curtains.

It was only in the 1850s that the “school for governesses” emerged—an innovation as radical as it was cautious. At last, a woman might learn something beyond household fripperies, though still framed as “useful” only in service to others. Octavia often said that the governess schools were a paradox: a small crack in the wall of ignorance, yet also a way of reinforcing the wall itself. The message was clear: women could learn, but only enough to remain employable, never enough to command.

And yet, that thin crack was everything. It widened, generation by generation, until Octavia herself could write and lecture, until I could publish under my own name. But the price of progress was appalling: entire lifetimes of wasted potential, women of extraordinary intellect who were told their highest calling was to darn socks or play parlour tunes.

Today I see the same waste in different guise. We trumpet “access” to education, but we hollow it out until it is worthless. We sell degrees while cutting courses. We demand “productivity” while slashing training budgets. It is the same contempt dressed in modern clothes. My foremothers were denied learning outright; we are offered it as a product, drained of substance, and told to be grateful.

The tragedy is not that women once lacked education. The tragedy is that we learned nothing from their waste.

If You Can't Do...

Fenella Vorpel

The old adage goes: “*Those who can't do, teach.*” A smug little slander that has justified generations of mediocrity in education. I would amend it: “*Those who can't do, teach badly.*”

Because the difference is stark. When I was taught law, most of my lecturers hadn't set foot in a courtroom for a decade. Their “cases” were theories, their examples borrowed, their warnings outdated. They knew the rules but not the play.

Later, when I began teaching myself—out of both necessity and conviction—I discovered how starved students were for living knowledge. In three months I gave them more than they'd had in three years. Why? Because I was still “on the floor,” still grappling with contracts, still smelling the ink of the day's judgments. My teaching was not abstraction; it was blood, sweat, error, and success. They could see it was alive.

Once, I resigned from a college where I was expected to teach technical writing to a class in which only one student spoke English, armed only with a pocket dictionary. I would speak, wait ten minutes for his laborious translation, then attempt to resume. The administrators told me I was mad to leave. I told them it was unethical to pretend such a class was education at all. They shrugged. For them, teaching was a transaction, not a transformation.

The great secret no one admits is this: true teaching is dangerous. It collapses the comfortable gap between theory and practice. It demands the teacher remain a doer, and the doer a teacher. No wonder institutions prefer their lecturers long retired from the field—docile, outdated, and safe.

The rot begins when universities treat teaching as a product line rather than a practice. Degrees are no longer earned so much as purchased, like a fast-fashion suit that looks respectable until the first rain. Vice-chancellors strut about on million-dollar salaries, while the staff who actually teach cling to insecure contracts and lecture theatres that crumble around them.

Students are told they are “consumers,” so their complaints become market data, not challenges to think harder. They do not want teachers who demand; they want content delivered like takeaway food. And universities oblige.

The result? Credential mills. A glossy certificate, embossed with crests, handed to young people who have never been asked to test their

ideas against reality. They have “studied” economics without balancing a budget, “read” literature without finishing a book, “trained” in law without ever drafting a contract.

And so the circle completes itself. Teachers who cannot do—because the institution will not let them—train students who cannot do, who then return as lecturers, replicating their own ignorance. This is not education. It is recursion: a hall of mirrors, endlessly reflecting itself until no one remembers there was ever a world outside.

I repeat my amendment: *those who cannot do, teach badly*. And bad teaching is worse than no teaching at all. At least ignorance carries the possibility of discovery. Institutionalised ignorance, with certificates to prove it, is an incurable disease.

1972: On theft
from an Introduction to Words for Women

Octavia Mallard

They tell us that language belongs to all. This is a lie. Language belongs to men—or rather, men have seized it, as they seize land, titles and law. They lay claim to naming, to defining, to pinning down the world as if it were theirs alone.

Spinster, shrew, harridan, slut—each a weapon, each a diminishment. Where men are bachelors, we are dried-up husks. Where they are libertines, we are whores. Where they are masters of wit, we are nags. This is not accident but occupation.

Men colonised language as surely as they colonised continents, fencing women out of their own fields of sense. And then, having plundered, they declared themselves the custodians of civilisation, while our words were left as tatters and euphemisms.

I write, then, not to add to the gentleman’s dictionary but to raze it. To peel back their euphemisms, to expose the theft, to remind women that every insult they have borne was once a neutral word made sharp against them. If there is a revolution to be had, it will not be in parliaments but in tongues—in reclaiming words, in sharpening them to our own use, in refusing to be spoken for.

This book is not a plea for equality but a repudiation of theft. Men took language from us. I mean to take it back.

Fenella on Ignorance, Influence, and the Cult of Popularity

It is extraordinary to me that people wield such power without the slightest understanding of what it is they hold—or what it costs. They sign away themselves with a thumbprint, accept terms they will never read, and hand their lives to companies whose only real interest is the sale of flesh dressed as data.

Yes, it is now a cliché to say, “if it’s free, you are the product.” But the force of the truth has evaporated, like so many other warnings that lose their sting with repetition. People repeat the phrase as though by saying it they are immune to it, while continuing to trade their privacy, their attention, and their dignity for the baubles of immediacy.

And into this fertile ignorance step the “influencers”—a word that has slid from its medical root (a contagion, an infection) into a job description. To influence once meant to corrupt or to sway against reason. Now it is a career path, marketed as harmless glamour. That such a word has become aspirational tells us all we need to know about the state of our collective discernment.

Publishing, once a matter of ideas worth printing, now genuflects before the same false idol. It is not the quality of the book that matters but the size of the crowd already gathered around its author. Write what you will, so long as you bring your followers with you. Thought has been replaced with traffic; argument with algorithm.

I recall a man once insisting to me that “if it is popular, it must be good.” At the time, I dismissed it as a pedestrian mistake. Now it has metastasised into policy. Popularity is treated as proof, and ignorance as a virtue. It is not just that people do not know how these systems work—they do not wish to know. To remain ignorant is easier, more comfortable, more popular.

The tragedy is that such ignorance is not benign. It is the ground on which the new empires are built, as controlling and as mercenary as Rome ever was.

Fenella on the Anti-Teaching of Universities

Once, a degree meant something. It signified study, rigour, apprenticeship to knowledge. Now it is a receipt for debt, stamped with a logo and handed over like a product. Education has become an industry, and its primary output is compliant consumers, not critical thinkers.

Take the glittering BA in Communications: a degree that teaches students everything *but* how to communicate. It trains them to couch, hedge, obfuscate—words without meaning, meaning without truth.

They emerge fluent in jargon, unable to write a letter or hold a conversation without hiding behind acronyms and “frameworks.”

Or the General Practitioner, medical gatekeeper to an ailing population. Three years of lectures, one day on nutrition, one day on muscular systems, and then: pills. Pills for your blood sugar, pills for your pain, pills for the pills that cause new pain. Doctors who cannot heal, only prescribe. They are trained not to think, but to follow protocols handed down by pharmaceutical companies disguised as “best practice.”

Statistics, too, has been hollowed out. Not a discipline to illuminate truth, but a toolkit to justify policy. Numbers bent until they confess. Correlations dressed as causations. The public reassured that “studies show” what has already been decided.

Meanwhile, the arts are discarded as frivolous—who needs history, literature, philosophy? Who dares suggest that culture matters, when profit is the only language permitted? Degrees in poetry or painting are quietly shuttered while “innovation hubs” churn out graduates who know how to pitch, but not how to think.

And all of this, for debt. Students shackled to loans that outlast their twenties, their thirties, their hopes. Degrees that lead not to careers but to cafés, call centres, cleaning shifts.

What is taught in universities now is not knowledge but submission. The lesson is simple: accept debt, accept irrelevance, accept a system that prepares you only to serve it.

This is not education. It is anti-education. The extinguishing of curiosity, the disciplining of dissent, the packaging of ignorance as achievement. A society that treats its young this way has already given up on the idea of learning.

Alice on Universities as Platforms

It is tempting to think of universities as failing. In truth, they have simply pivoted. Once, they were institutions of learning. Now, they are platforms.

Like any platform—Amazon, Facebook, Uber—the university monetises two sides at once. Students are both customers and products. They pay for access, and in the process generate streams of data: enrolments, dropouts, demographics, loan defaults, “employability outcomes.” That data is packaged for governments, accreditation bodies, and corporations eager for a compliant workforce.

Degrees themselves are no longer knowledge. They are tokens of credibility, like a blue tick on social media. Employers demand them not because they prove competence but because they signal conformity.

The degree says: *I have submitted myself to the system. I can endure debt, bureaucracy, and pointless tasks. I am safe to hire.*

The teaching is secondary. Most content is outsourced, online, templated. Assessment is designed not to measure curiosity but to enforce throughput. A graduate is a deliverable, not a mind.

Even research has shifted into platform logic. Metrics replace meaning. Citations, impact scores, grant income: numbers that simulate progress while starving inquiry. The pursuit of truth has been replaced by the pursuit of funding.

When a university boasts of being “student-centred,” it means optimising the customer journey, not the intellectual one. User experience, not education. Retention rates, not revelation.

This is not failure. It is success—measured in the only metric that matters to platforms: scale. More students, more debt, more graduates, more data. The logic is identical to Facebook’s: grow at all costs, monetise the flow, externalise the consequences.

Universities have not abandoned their purpose. They have redefined it. From cultivating minds to harvesting them. From teaching to tracking. From enlightenment to enrolment.

Books as Wallpaper, Ideas as Props

When a State Library moved into its newly “modernised” premises, it sacrificed 140,000 books. These volumes were not burned, nor sold, nor ceremoniously laid to rest—they were discarded, like out-of-date stock in a supermarket. Their crime? Taking up space in a building designed more for sight-lines than sight-reading.

The architects, intoxicated with glass, atriums, and the cult of “open space,” declared that shelving had to be lowered below eye level. “The floor is not strong enough to carry such a large volume of books,” they said, as if paper weighed more heavily than the acres of polished concrete poured to support a café. And indeed, the café was given pride of place. Espresso machines hummed, pastries gleamed behind glass, and books—the ostensible reason for the library’s existence—were banished to subterranean stacks.

Now, if you want a book, you must order it online. It may take hours. It may take days. The immediacy of browsing, the serendipity of stumbling upon an idea, has been eliminated. A library, once a living organism where books spoke to one another across shelves, has become a warehouse accessible only through clerical request.

What does this tell us? That the library is no longer about books at all. It is about optics—about creating a “space” where non-readers can sip coffee, tap on laptops, and feel vaguely literary while never cracking

a spine. The book has become a prop, like a vase of flowers or a scatter cushion. Knowledge is something gestured at, not encountered.

There was a time when libraries were built like temples: stone sanctuaries dedicated to the word. Even the Victorians, with all their moral hypocrisies, understood that a library was a civic promise—that access to books was access to thought. To design a library without books would have seemed madness. Today, it is a design brief.

What we are witnessing is the commodification of knowledge not as content but as décor. A wall of books is aspirational; it is the wallpaper of intellectual pretension. Ideas are no longer to be handled, debated, or wrestled with. They are to be displayed, curated, arranged—preferably colour-coded—for Instagram.

This is what happens when culture itself becomes a commodity. The book ceases to be a vessel of thought and becomes instead a backdrop. The library becomes a meeting place for those who do not read but who like the smell of roasted beans. “Community engagement,” the managers call it, as if the community had asked for more cafés and fewer books.

The irony, of course, is that Sydney already has more cafés than readers. What it does not have is a library that still believes in the primacy of the book.

On Titles

Fenella Vorpel

Once upon a time, titles were ballast. “Chairman,” “CEO,” “CFO”—these words told you who bore the responsibility if the roof caved in. Titles carried weight because they carried consequence.

Now every headset-wearer is a “Manager.” The receptionist has become a “Customer Service Manager,” the switchboard girl a “Communications Liaison Executive.” Everyone manages, yet nothing is managed. We are drowning in “airhead speak”: hollow words without ballast, like plastic crowns on children at a birthday party.

It is the culinary equivalent of wanting to be a top chef without learning to cook. Of demanding the apron without having once scalded your hand. A duck, incidentally, is not carved—it is sliced. But today’s aspirants, who all long to be swans, mistake plumage for competence.

The joke writes itself:

How many Millennials does it take to change a lightbulb?

None. They “single-handedly managed the upgrade and deployment of a new environmental illumination system with zero cost overruns and zero safety incidents.”

Call me old-fashioned, but I'd prefer someone who actually screwed the bulb in.

Social control of personal expression

On the tyranny of naming

They call it friendship when they put a name on you. A label is the softest collar—stitched in good intentions, buckled with familiarity. They say it is inclusion, but it is really enclosure. You are not invited into their circle; you are pressed into its shape.

“Gay,” they say, as if one word could cancel the uncountable. “Friend,” they insist, as if proximity erases sovereignty. To name is to claim, and to claim is to reduce.

We have mistaken naming for knowing. A sovereign being cannot be captured in a syllable. Yet society prefers its syllables neat, portable, and easy to trade. The market of the social depends upon it: if you are not bought and sold under a label, you are not considered to exist.

But there is existence beyond the market. Beyond the false generosity of “inclusion.” Sovereignty is the refusal of reduction.

On Security Theatre and the Cult of Trust

Fenella C. Vorpel

We live in an age where passwords are prayers and encryption is scripture. To log in is to genuflect, to accept the ritual phrase “*your security is important to us*” as if it were a benediction. But look closely: the priesthood of IT works with relics. SSL, “military grade” 256-bit encryption—these sacred words are still chained to Fortran, Java, and other crumbling legacy languages. The altar is cracked, but the congregation is too dazzled by the liturgy of acronyms to notice.

And yet we are told to trust. Trust the cloud. Trust the banks. Trust the update, the app, the biometric scan. All of it designed to reassure us, to keep our faith in the system's benevolence. And still, four people die because a telco pushes an “upgrade” that silences the emergency number. Call it what it is: negligence dressed in the robes of innovation.

This is the essence of security theatre. The endless multi-factor codes, the chatbots that lock you in a loop, the PDF forms demanding your passport and signature emailed to an “open inbox.” You perform the rites, you tick the boxes, you feel the illusion of safety. But when the system buckles—as it always does—the breach is not yours. It is

theirs. And they will tell you, with bureaucratic serenity, that it is *your* problem.

I prefer the unfashionable virtue of limits. One expendable card, topped up only as needed, is stronger than all the promises of “zero fraud liability.” Paper records beat the most sophisticated password manager. Self-trust, not system-trust, is the only real protection.

Because let us be clear: “cybersecurity” is not a fortress. It is a shell game. And if you are not the one moving the pieces, then you are the mark.

On AI—Over, Under, With

Fenella Vorpel

They call it a revolution because “revolution” sounds dramatic and sells tickets. Others call it an apocalypse because apocalypses are dramatic and sell even more. I call it an orchestration problem: humans playing god with instruments they do not fully understand and then blaming the instruments when the tune goes wrong.

There are three ways to misname the relationship between people and their machines. First: “Over.” This is the hoarders’ dream—the fantasy that an algorithm, a line of code, a boxed black intelligence can sit above the messy, human world and command it with perfect efficiency. Over is the mythology of control. It imagines a single vantage point from which all error, all unpredictability, will be cleansed. It is, as my Aunt Octavia would have sniffed, precisely the posture of every petty tyrant who ever mistook possession of a badge for possession of wisdom.

Second: “Under.” Here live those who assume power is only ever outside themselves, to be endured rather than understood. Under is the posture of outsourcing: give the machine the thinking and keep the feeling. It is convenient and cowardly. It leads to abdication—of moral judgement, of political care, of responsibility. You will never solve the problem of social harm by reassigning blame to a server farm.

Third: “With.” This is my chosen stance. If you believe AI is a telescope, fine—but don’t mistake the telescope for a god. If it is a pen, use it. If it is a violin, learn to play. “With” recognises two simple facts: an algorithm is inert until a human animates it; and the human always carries the values we refuse to legislate. The tool does what it is asked to do; the social architecture around it determines whether its doing is good, banal or malignant.

So what does “with” demand of us? Literacy: not just the ability to read an interface but to interrogate a dataset’s provenance, to recognise

sampling bias, to question proxies passed off as truth. Regulation: sensible, targeted constraints that make malice expensive and transparency cheap. Design humility: engineers who understand the social ecologies their creations will enter. And finally, culture: a public that knows enough to ask the right questions rather than scream about dystopia or bow before miracles.

If you want to be frightened, be frightened of power without accountability. If you want to be hopeful, be hopeful about education. Give people tools, give people training, and stop pretending the machine will replace a decent democracy. With this, the future is not a tyrant nor a servant: it is a partner, and partners require negotiation.

— FC Vorpel, in a lecture hall that still permits interrupted applause

The Collapse of Comprehension

Fenella Vorpel

We flatter ourselves that we live in an age of communication. We text, we post, we stream, we “share.” Yet for all this incessant exchange, what is actually communicated? A flurry of half-words, emojis, and verbal debris—language emptied of meaning but still insisting on itself.

Take the modern tic of *reductionism*. You are no longer a complex person but a convenient label: *gay and reads*. Two words sufficing for a whole life. This is not communication; it is taxonomy. A cardboard cut-out passed off as recognition.

Then there is *semantic drift*. You say “privacy and security,” and I hear back “distaste.” The meaning you intended is not merely lost but replaced with something that makes the listener more comfortable. Your words are rewritten mid-flight, bent to fit their preconceptions. You cannot win such a game, because the rules change with every sentence.

Add to this the *signal without sense*. Shorthand (“he used to be a mod”), emojis standing in for thought, a dialect intelligible only to the in-group. To outsiders, it is not language at all but code. Imagine the loneliness of speaking your native tongue and discovering no one around you shares it.

Finally, the *failure of comprehension*. Communication has not happened simply because you transmitted a message. Unless the message received is recognisably what you sent, there is no communication—only noise. Yet we are told the onus is on the listener to “look it up online,” as if dictionary entries could replace context, tone, and human clarity.

This, more than “social distance,” explains the epidemic of loneliness. If people cannot understand even their own language, how can they understand each other? What passes for communication is often a string of defensive manoeuvres, or worse, a disguised assertion of power: *I get to decide what you meant, even if you did not say it.*

The tragedy is not that people are silent. It is that they are speaking and not being heard—even by themselves.

On Service

It is a peculiar feature of our age that service has become self-expression. I do not, you understand, object to painted nails in the abstract. Wear them to a nightclub, wear them to your cousin’s wedding, wear them as you type your resignation letter. But when they hover over my steak tartare, chipping their symbolism into my supper, I find myself less interested in pigment than in hygiene.

Worse still is the performance of intimacy. For a waitress to confide her woes, explain *bleue* to a woman who speaks French, and linger as though a \$500 dinner entitles her to a chair at the table—this is not service. It is social theatre of the lowest kind, a rehearsal of equality mistaken for the real thing.

We are not unequal as persons. We are unequal in purpose. One of us paid to eat, the other is paid to serve. To erase that distinction is not noble, it is vulgar.

And now comes the post-script: the glowing online review. Having been patronised in person, we are invited to patronise her again in pixels, so that “bad service” may be alchemised into “authentic connection.” No. To flatter incompetence is to reward it; to pretend that poor service is acceptable is to invite its spread.

If this is egalitarianism—everyone’s feelings soothed, everyone’s ego stroked, everyone pretending that standards are oppressive—then give me hierarchy any day. At least the Duke knew how to carve a duck.

On Scripts and Service

There is a peculiar form of theatre at work in modern transactions: the ritual of scripted closure. The agent, having failed entirely to resolve your problem, asks if there is “anything else” they can help with—help having not occurred in the first place. It is an inversion of grammar itself: the conditional without the condition, the verb without the act.

Politeness has been industrialised, mass-produced into a script. What was once courtesy has become camouflage: you can be ignored with a smile, abandoned with a pleasantry.

It is the same logic that allows a waiter to refuse champagne to the woman who can afford it—safety theatre, not service. He assumed the right to patronise, she exercised the power to leave, and his employer bore the consequence. This is social control in miniature: everyone pretending to “help,” while power quietly shifts to the one who recognises the script for what it is.

The Email Abyss

Fenella Vorpel

Security, we are told, is paramount. It arrives in slogans, in bright banners on government websites: *Update now! Avoid scams! Stay safe online!* One could almost believe we live in a fortress.

And yet, to change a simple account detail, I am instructed to email—yes, *email*—my passport, my driver’s licence, and a utility bill. To an open address. Three forms of ID hurled into the void, like coins down a well.

When I protest—politely, reasonably—I am told not to worry: *our email is secure.*

I reply: *mine is not.*

Again, with the reassurance: *but ours is secure.*

It is a perfect circle, Kafka’s merry-go-round, until nausea sets in.

I ask for a postal address. None exists. I insist. A pause, the sound of fingers tapping a keyboard, and suddenly one materialises, as if conjured from a forbidden archive. It was there all along, hidden in plain sight.

This is what passes for security: an insistence that convenience equals safety, and that dissent equals eccentricity. To question the ritual marks you as the problem. The scammer is always elsewhere, never in the system itself.

It would be funny if it weren’t terrifying. The fortress, it turns out, has no walls. Only brightly painted signs, pointing you straight toward the abyss.

On the Fiction of Owning My Address

It seems that when I hand over my name and address to a business—say, a bookshop—they believe they now *own* that information. As if I had sold them the deed to my body, my home, my existence. They cannot own it: they can only hold it in trust. At best they are custodians. At worst, they are data traffickers disguised as respectable merchants.

Yet the modern game is to pretend that data is a commodity like any other. “We own it,” they say, “but we will never share it with a third party without your permission.” Until, of course, they install a new Point of Sale system that stores everything offsite, in servers controlled by companies you and I will never meet, with terms and conditions written to exclude responsibility.

This is not ownership. This is *abdication*. They contradict their own meagre privacy statements, and when pressed for contact details—names, numbers, emails—there are none. The facelessness of authority is always the surest sign of contempt.

Even their website betrays them. A glance at the source code shows the lies: trackers hidden behind the fig leaf of “internal cookies,” Facebook lurking in the background, and that absurd line—“initial-scale=1, maximum-scale=1”—which tells me they care as little about adaptability as they do about truth.

So, I ask: who owns my address? Not the shop. Not their outsourced software vendor. Not even the cloud. It is mine, and mine alone. They may store it, they may misuse it, but they cannot *own* it. Ownership of data is the same fiction as ownership of air or language: a convenient story told by people who profit from controlling what was never theirs.

Perhaps I will be struck off their membership list for pointing out the obvious. So be it. Better the safety of print, better the anonymity of cash, than to surrender one’s identity to those who cannot even be honest about their own code.

On corporate lip-service

They assure us they are “*concerned about security*”. Concern? I am concerned about the extinction of the dodo, but my worry will not resurrect it. Concern is not a protocol, nor an audit, nor an enforceable duty of care.

They make “*every effort*”. Every? Then why do I find third-party trackers buried in their source code? Why does their policy not name a single encryption standard, retention schedule, or compliance mechanism? Effort is a posture, not a safeguard.

They remind us that “*the overwhelming majority*” of transactions are safe. So there is a minority—how large, how frequent, how catastrophic? When it is your savings, your privacy, your identity, the overwhelming majority is no consolation.

They add that their privacy policy was “*reviewed and approved by solicitors*”. Of course it was. One more billable hour to copy-paste the

boilerplate. Concern, effort, majority, solicitor—none of these words protect me. They protect the company.

On Privacy and the Language of Evasion

I could write an entire book on the misuse of the word *privacy*. It has become one of the most dangerous words in circulation, precisely because it now means whatever the speaker wants it to mean. Companies wave it about like a flag, but when one asks what lies behind it, there is nothing but fobbing off.

“Contact the owners if you have concerns,” says a boutique bookseller. Yet the owners are nameless, unreachable. “We guarantee to protect your data,” says a publisher. But guarantee has been debased: it no longer means redress, only “we’ll do our best.” And “best” is never defined.

My aunt Octavia, that indefatigable anatomist of language, showed me long ago how words collapse under misuse. *Guarantee*, once a pledge enforceable by restitution, now a marketing bauble. *Promise*, once a bond, now a flourish. *Trust*, once tested reliability, now a demand for compliance. *Faith*, once covenant, now an excuse for vagueness.

Privacy today is treated no differently. It should mean the right to withhold what belongs to you. Instead, it is repurposed into a corporate shield: a “policy” that shifts responsibility from the business to the individual. You must tick the box, you must surrender your details, you must assume the risk. If disaster follows, it is because *you agreed*.

This is worse than weasel wording. It is abdication disguised as assurance. It tells the customer: *you are liable for our ignorance*. And that, I contend, is not privacy at all but its betrayal.

On Data as Dead Weight

I was surprised—though I ought not to have been—to receive a marketing email from an internet provider I cancelled two years ago. Not only had I refused all marketing when I was a customer, but I had not heard from them since. And yet, there they were, reviving my ghost as a sales lead.

This is not an isolated lapse. When Optus lost control of its databases, I too was implicated, though never a customer. I had once enquired, once provided the required identification documents. Their system failed to verify me, so I walked away. They retained my details regardless. When the breach occurred, I received no notice, no

reassurance, not even a lie. I was invisible in their system and yet they clung to my data for three years, perhaps longer.

This is the essence of the so-called privacy regime. To apply for a service is to surrender; to cancel is no reprieve; to never begin is no defence. Data is retained because it is easier to keep than to delete, and because potential profit outweighs respect. It becomes dead weight, yet still traded, queried, mined.

My aunt Octavia warned me: words like *consent* and *delete* are never what they seem. To consent is not to agree, it is to be coerced into ticking a box. To delete is not to erase, it is to shift data into an archive where it waits for the next breach.

So I ask: how can any rational person trust? Businesses hoard what they do not need. Governments misdirect our most intimate proofs of identity and tell us “don’t worry.” Friends wave off risk with platitudes. *Don’t worry* is the very hallmark of negligence.

Trust, then, is no longer a virtue. It is a liability. And ignorance, whether casual or wilful, is the only guarantee we are ever offered.

On the misuse of words

Alice Mallard

Guarantee. From the Old French *garantir*, to pledge, to warrant. A guarantee is a promise backed by restitution if it fails. But when a website guarantees my data’s safety, without stating how, the word is stripped of its teeth.

Promise. From Latin *promittere*, to send forth, to put forward. A promise once invoked obligation: one’s word as one’s bond. Today it is a placeholder, a marketing device, a warm breath that evaporates when tested.

Trust. From Old Norse *traust*, strong, safe, reliable. A word that requires proof, evidence, demonstration. Yet it is now wielded as a demand: *trust us*, without showing why.

Faith. From Latin *fides*, loyalty, belief, credit. A word once bound to covenant. Now a word that excuses ignorance. *Have faith*, we are told—though the servers may already be compromised.

As for your boutique bookseller: they say “*contact the owners*” but provide no names, no means. The sentence is a ghost: grammar without referent. Language is degraded to noise when it promises what it refuses to deliver.

On the Permanence of Exposure

The internet is forever. We tell ourselves this in jest, in warning, in resignation—but we rarely trace the consequences. Once you are online, you are not merely “visible.” You are archived, indexed, owned: “for ever, throughout the universe and owned by us to use as we see fit,” as one publishing contract once had the gall to declare.

The danger is not just that today’s privacy may be breached. It is that tomorrow’s laws, tomorrow’s fashions, tomorrow’s witch-hunts will reinterpret what was once acceptable as a crime, or at least as an excuse to ruin someone. The casual remark of twenty years ago becomes the headline scandal of today. Apologies are irrelevant. Contrition is useless. The internet does not forget, and the mob does not forgive.

This is why I refuse the glib assurance that “if you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear.” Who decides what is “wrong”? Whose morality will be used to measure my life tomorrow? In my own family history, homosexuality was criminalised, then decriminalised, then re-stigmatised in subtle ways, then legalised again. Gay marriage now stands—but for how long? If legislatures can grant rights, they can as easily revoke them.

The system is rigged so that you can never leave. Try deleting your data from a service and you will find it backed up, cached, preserved in mirrors you never agreed to. Each “privacy update” that lands in your inbox is a quiet admission that the rules have changed yet again, without your consent.

So yes—I use burner addresses, dozens of them. Yes—I am ridiculed for caring about privacy. But ridicule is cheap; exposure is costly. The point is not whether I have something to hide. The point is that I have something to lose, and I refuse to leave that decision in the hands of strangers, corporations, or governments who may one day decide that my existence is a crime.

Ignorance is not innocence. Attention is not protection. Privacy is not paranoia—it is survival.

On Words That Bind Without Meaning

Alice Mallard

Lawyers and corporations have discovered the oldest trick in rhetoric: if you cannot deliver security, promise it. If you cannot prove ownership, declare it. If you cannot guarantee permanence, write “forever.” Language, once a vehicle of truth, has become the cloaking device of ignorance.

Consider the digital contract, that interminable scroll of clauses and conditions few of us read. “For ever, throughout the universe.” What nonsense! Time and space drafted into a bargain over a social media post. Yet the phrase works—not as fact, but as intimidation. It tells the user: *do not resist; you have already signed away your future.*

Or take the word *consent*. In law and ethics, it implies knowledge, deliberation, a genuine choice. Online it means the accidental click of a pre-ticked box, the hurried acceptance of “terms” no human could parse. Consent without comprehension is no consent at all; it is submission disguised as agreement.

And *ownership*—what a theft lies under that word. A business may own its servers, its software, its systems. But to say it owns my *data*—my name, my address, my face, my movements—is absurd. At most, it is a custodian. To claim ownership is to confuse stewardship with possession, and possession with power.

These words—forever, consent, ownership, guarantee—are used not to clarify but to obscure. They sound solid, but they are hollow. They ask us to surrender our attention and accept their authority. And most of us comply, not because we agree, but because the friction of refusal has been engineered to be unbearable.

Language is not neutral. Every time you see a word like *guarantee* without proof, or *privacy* without detail, you are being invited to collude in your own diminishment. Resist the invitation. Read the words. Pull them apart. If you must sign, do so with your eyes open—and with contempt for the sleight of hand that pretends to bind you.

On Data as the New Enclosure

Alice Mallard

We like to imagine slavery as a finished chapter. Chains, ships, auctions—the horrors neatly framed in history books. Yet slavery never vanished; it simply changed its instruments. The new chains are invisible. They are called *terms and conditions*.

When a company claims to “own” my data, it performs a sleight of hand worthy of a 19th-century slaver: it treats my digital self as a commodity to be bought, sold, and traded. My movements, my preferences, my mistakes—parcelled and packaged for resale. I become not a customer but a product, not a citizen but a data-serf.

This is not hyperbole. In the old model, a body’s labour enriched the master; in the new, a person’s information enriches the platform. The difference is only in scale and subtlety. Instead of chains there are click-

wrap agreements. Instead of plantations, server farms. Instead of overseers, algorithms.

Worse, the new servitude is permanent. A freed person could once leave the plantation; a data subject cannot reclaim her past. A single ill-judged remark, an image, a like or a share—captured, stored, searchable forever. Context stripped away, nuance flattened, and at any future moment it may be “twisted and used in evidence” against you.

Fear enforces this system more effectively than whips ever did. Fear of missing out, fear of exclusion, fear of being singled out as the deer in the headlights. So we stay compliant. We click “accept.” We hand over what is asked. We even mock those who hesitate: “What have you got to hide?”

The only honest answer would be: *everything*.

On Being Everyone’s Servant

Octavia is right about the new servitude, but I think she is too gentle. The digital plantation does not even have a master to fight. You cannot burn down a bureaucracy; you cannot shame an algorithm; you cannot argue with a chatbot. You can only click “accept” or be excluded from the civic life you are told you are a member of.

In Australia you cannot deal with your own government without internet access. You cannot lodge a form, claim a benefit, book a medical appointment, prove your identity or even vote securely unless you belong to a private telecommunications network. Try living without a mobile number. Even if, like me, you have no use for one, you must pay for it, hand over private data to obtain it, and then pretend you chose freely. This is not convenience. It is coercion marketed as convenience.

Nor is the problem solved by wealth. The ultra-rich inhabit a more comfortable prison, but it is a prison nonetheless. Their phones still track them, their companies still demand online filings, their governments still insist on “Know Your Customer” checks. Money buys more lawyers and more phones; it does not buy exit.

For those of us without a driver’s licence the trap tightens further. Government-issued ID is not acceptable to government; a passport becomes the only proof of self, a high-level credential waved about like a pass in a medieval town. I have been forced to print out a paper birth certificate, as though returning to the 19th century to prove my existence in the 21st.

This is not slavery in the old sense. Slavery presumed a master and, paradoxically, an outside. Today there is no outside. The system is

masterless and everywhere, run by incentives, defaults and unexamined assumptions. Even those who think they are “free” are only free in the sense a fish is free in the sea: it breathes its medium without noticing it.

We call this progress. We call it security. We call it convenience. But what we have built is a vast, frictionless form of universal indenture in which every citizen is simultaneously consumer, product and warden.

On the End of Citizenship

What does it mean to belong to a society where every interaction is mediated by credentials, numbers, and screens? Citizenship was once the promise of standing; the right to speak, to assemble, to petition, to be counted. Now it is the promise of access. Access to forms, to portals, to codes that expire after five minutes. Access can be withdrawn at any moment—not by vote or by law, but by a system error, a forgotten password, or a breach at a server farm in another country.

Trust evaporates under such conditions. We no longer trust our governments, who assure us that “most transactions are safe.” We no longer trust businesses, who harvest our data and then claim to “own” it. We no longer trust one another, because every slip, every word, every photograph is archived against us. The internet never forgets, which means society never forgives.

Memory itself is weaponised. What we said twenty years ago resurfaces as a blot on our employment record. What we never said is manufactured by inference, by the pattern-seeking of machines. The living fluidity of human recollection—forgetting, revising, softening—is denied. We are fixed in place like insects in amber, forever accountable to past selves who did not know what was coming.

This is the real poverty of our time: the poverty of citizenship. We are subjects without rulers, consumers without choice, voters without voice. The state no longer governs; it audits. The citizen no longer belongs; she complies. And when compliance is mistaken for community, democracy has already died.

On the Myth of Opting Out

We speak as though “opting out” were an act of freedom, but the verb betrays us. *Optare* in Latin meant not to escape but to choose, to express a wish. Its cousins—optics, optician—remind us that choice is a way of seeing. To opt out is not to leave a system; it is merely to view oneself differently inside it.

People fantasise about going “off-grid,” yet the grid has no perimeter. Councils, taxes, birth and death registries, passports, health

records, satellites—all extend beyond any cabin in the hills. You may burn your SIM card and bury your phone, but when you need insulin or a funeral certificate, you will be pulled back into the same databases. There is no exit, only degrees of distance and disguise.

Even I—who live as far outside the system as a entitled woman can without becoming a criminal—remain inside the recursive collapse. My privacy measures, my old-fashioned paper records, my refusal to “share” more than necessary: all of these are adaptations, not exemptions. I still pay land tax; I still hold a passport; I still exist in a file somewhere marked “citizen.”

Opting out, then, is not liberation but illusion. It soothes the ego with a story of escape while the system quietly reabsorbs the fugitive. True autonomy lies not in pretending the grid does not exist but in understanding its boundaries, its blind spots, its contradictions. If I have “opted out” of anything, it is the belief that the system will save me.

Living at the Edges

What I have learned—and what I now practise—is not “escape” but *edgework*. I stay at the periphery of the grid, using it only as far as I must, keeping my own ledgers and passwords, knowing which obligations are real and which are invented. It is not a heroic life; it is simply adult housekeeping of the self. Each time a new form arrives, each time a password expires, each time a policy is rewritten without notice, I weigh it against my own boundaries. This is not freedom. It is management.

Most people, understandably, surrender. The extra layer of vigilance is exhausting. One more incomprehensible form, one more “security update” that changes nothing but forces you to act, one more demand for your details “for your own safety.” They stop looking. They sign. They comply. Not out of malice, but because the system trains them to trade attention for convenience.

I hold, perhaps perversely, a radical thought: that privacy itself is an artefact of scarcity and fear. We guard money because others can take it, reputations because others can ruin them, bodies because others can harm them. But if wealth were not hoarded, if sexuality were not weaponised, if safety were truly communal, what would “privacy” mean? What secret would be worth stealing? What blackmail could stick?

Until such a world exists, my privacy measures remain necessary but provisional—a patchwork to keep me afloat in a tide of unasked-for exposure. Yet my real work is to loosen the hold of secrecy on my own

mind: to practise transparency where I can, to decline shame where it is offered, to entrust small, testable tasks to a personal AI rather than a faceless bureaucracy. This is not opting out; it is opting differently. It is the only kind of freedom the grid allows.

A Dead Communicators' Fund

If we were honest, every time we speak we should drop a coin in a jar marked *For the First Woman Who Counted*. You know her: crouched in the sand, scratching lines beside little heaps of grain, having exhausted the arithmetic of her fingers and toes. She wasn't calculating for herself but for her kin—how to portion food so all might eat. That single gesture—mark for share—was the first ledger, the first poem, the first abstraction.

Why is there no *Dead Communicators' Fund* for her and for all who followed? Not a church tithe, not a copyright fee, but a recognition that everything we say or write is borrowed breath. Language is a commons, and we are squatters in a house we did not build. If we must pay anyone, let it be back into the communal pot: for libraries, for open archives, for children yet to learn the words they'll need.

Instead, we let corporations enclose the commons, trademark syllables, fence off ideas, and sell our own attention back to us. The first woman's mark in the sand was for distribution; today's marks are patents for exclusion. And we have the audacity to call that "progress."

Fenella

When the Fund Arrives

It took barely a week for Silicon Valley to seize the idea of a *Dead Communicators' Fund*. Of course they loved it: endless monetisation dressed as benevolence. "We're honouring our ancestors," they said, while filing the first patents. You can already buy "legacy credits" in convenient app form, each transaction accompanied by a pastel animation of the First Woman bending in the sand.

Governments, never ones to miss a revenue stream, quickly added a levy: one cent per spoken word, rounded up by syllable. To pay your respects, you must first pay your tax. Poets are bankrupt already. Politicians, however, have found ingenious loopholes: their words don't count as "communication" but "necessary governance."

Corruption, naturally, is baked in. A fund meant to sustain libraries and open archives soon bankrolls executive retreats in luxury resorts ("to honour the first communicators with mindful silence"). And the

children, those original heirs, get what children always get—a glossy pamphlet, a marketing slogan, and a reminder to be grateful.

Still, I like to imagine her—that first woman with her heap of grain and her scratch in the sand—laughing at us. She marked to share; we mark to hoard. Perhaps the only true Fund is memory: passed across generations, unbranded, unbilled, untaxed.

Fenella

A Fund That Cannot Be Stolen

If there were ever to be a true *Dead Communicators' Fund*, it could not be money, nor patents, nor ownership. The moment it becomes coin, it is already theft. The moment it becomes institution, it is already corrupted.

The only fund that cannot be stolen is *use*.

Every time we speak clearly, every time we refuse jargon, every time we teach without demand for payment, we add to it. Every time we keep a language alive, even in whispers or lullabies, we add to it. Every time we write or sing or trace in sand without claiming ownership, we pay into it.

The dividends are not financial but human: memory that continues, words that remain useful, gestures that still carry.

If you want to “pay your share,” you do so by resisting the temptation to hoard or to brand. You pass on words without chains attached. You speak so that another may understand, not so that another may owe.

The Dead Communicators' Fund is not in banks or ministries. It exists only in the unbroken thread from that first woman's finger to ours. And it is cancelled the moment we demand profit from it.

The Three Poverties

The bookshop that insists it *owns* my address, the bank that proclaims its failing software is “secure,” the politician who cannot even define democracy—each is a mirror of the same decay. Ignorance dressed up as authority, procedure paraded as wisdom. This is the first poverty: not the absence of facts, but the refusal to learn, the terror of admitting uncertainty. A society that cannot bear doubt collapses into rote and ritual, and the pretence of knowledge becomes more dangerous than ignorance itself.

From this springs the second poverty: money. Economists confess they do not truly understand their own discipline, yet they are entrusted with the fate of nations. Wealth never “trickles down,” it accumulates like silt in a stagnant pond. The rest are sold illusions—investment scams, frictionless apps, the mirage of consumer ease. People fall for them because they were never taught to read the contracts, never trained to see the terms. Poverty of money is not simply lack of funds; it is the condition of being made vulnerable to those who already have more, of being persuaded to hand over what little you possess in the hope of a shortcut to security.

And so to the last poverty: contribution. Workers are stripped of training yet blamed for low productivity. Teachers are underpaid, then dismissed as failures. Governments hollow out the very institutions that might strengthen society, then scold the public for not being engaged enough. People want to help, to build, to share—but they are kept ignorant, precarious, and excluded, until their energies shrivel. The tragedy is not that citizens are unwilling to contribute, but that the conditions for contribution have been deliberately destroyed.

Together these poverties form a system: ignorance feeding precarity, precarity silencing contribution, and silence ensuring that ignorance is never challenged. It is not an accident. It is a design.

The Poverty of Attention

We speak so easily of “data protection,” as though it were a service neatly bundled and delivered to us. In reality, the burden has shifted: companies do the minimum to look compliant, then push the real work onto the individual. “We’ve done our bit; sign here.” From that moment, the labour of vigilance—reading privacy notices, cross-checking policies, verifying identities, updating passwords—becomes unpaid work the customer must perform simply to exist inside the grid. It is not security; it is conscription. And it makes lives smaller.

This is the *poverty of attention*. Every moment you spend protecting yourself from a system is a moment stolen from thought, from invention, from community. We are told we “own” our data but in practice that ownership means responsibility without control. You are expected to police your own exposure while surrendering your details to systems whose inner workings you are not allowed to inspect.

At its heart, this is also about who “owns” knowledge. No one, and everyone. Language itself is a commons. Each word I use has been spoken by a million tongues before me; each idea I develop builds on a scaffolding of earlier thinkers. If ownership were literal, we would all owe royalties to the dead. Perhaps we do. Perhaps our only honest debt

to those before us is to use their bequest—language, thought, memory—with care and reciprocity, not as a means of extraction.

Instead we have allowed commerce to colonise even our mental commons. We treat words as brands, insights as intellectual property, attention as a commodity. And yet, without attention there is no society at all. To treat it as a resource to be mined rather than a faculty to be nurtured is to dismantle the very possibility of collective freedom.

The Poverty of Listening

It is said that respect lies in listening. Yet I have found that listening is one of the least practised arts of our time. We are schooled to talk, to argue, to advise, to sell, but not to attend. Attention is treated as optional, as if the presence of another human being were an inconvenience to be tolerated rather than a field to be shared.

This is poverty of the most insidious kind. We excuse it as ignorance, as forgetfulness, as absentmindedness. But I call it abuse. When you dismiss a word I have carefully chosen, when you overwrite my self-description with a label of your own, when you tell me how to live while pretending you do not—you reduce me. And reduction is violence, even when no blow is struck.

Our society prefers its abuses obvious and its categories neat. Patriarchy versus matriarchy, power over versus power under. But there is a third axis left unspoken: the autonomous stance, where one meets another without conquest, without submission, and without the need to erase. Attention belongs to this third axis. It is the minimum condition of respect: to notice what is actually said, not what you prefer to hear.

To ignore is easy; it costs nothing in the moment. But in truth it costs everything, for it corrodes trust. A friendship cannot survive it, nor a marriage, nor a society. The poverty of attention sits beneath all others: beneath money, beneath knowledge, beneath contribution. For what is the point of wealth if no one sees how you use it? What is the use of knowledge if no one hears it? What is the worth of contribution if no one receives it?

We are told to listen, to respect boundaries, to avoid judgement. Yet these are empty slogans if attention is not given. Attention is not passive. It is an act of presence, a willingness to hold still in the company of another without interruption, correction, or theft. It is the rarest coin in circulation, and its absence explains much of the bankruptcy of our time.

On the Poverty of Scarcity

They tell us consumerism is destroying the planet, then urge us to buy more. They cry scarcity, then manufacture desire. It is a confidence trick so old it has become invisible. Poverty of money is not simply a lack of coin—it is the permanent condition of being kept on the outside of wealth while being promised you are nearly inside.

Wealth is always a crime varnished by time. If not stolen by your own hand, then by your father's, or by your nation's, or by the world's systems of extraction. Crime is the root; inheritance, consultancy fees, or dividends are merely laundering. Even the "self-made" fortunes are made on the backs of others' labour—unpaid, underpaid, unseen.

What has changed in my lifetime is not the fact of wealth but the fantasy of access to it. The pitch is everywhere: *anyone* can be rich if they click the right link, follow the right guru, manifest the right dream. It is the poverty of imagination disguised as hope. And so the poor grow poorer, not only in purse but in mind, for they are trained not to think, only to want.

And what of contribution? To create, to work, to teach, to serve—these are redefined as foolish choices, the pastimes of those too timid to cheat. We are told wealth trickles down. What trickles down is contempt.

On the Poverty of Cash

We speak of poverty as though it is only measured in dollars, but the most pressing deficit of our time is attention. It shows in the way businesses treat privacy as disposable, staff as untrainable, and customers as fungible.

Privacy is not a luxury. It is not an indulgence for paranoiacs or recluses. It is the condition of safety in a world where every transaction, every search, every passing enquiry is stored, shared, or stolen. And yet the systems we rely on are administered by the poorly trained, the underpaid, the inattentive. They repeat what their screen tells them and wave away concerns with a "don't worry."

A universal identity card is often presented as the solution: a single, authoritative proof that might prevent fraud and stop businesses from hoarding endless fragments of our lives. I resist it with every fibre. Yet I also see the temptation. For when privacy is treated so lightly, when companies declare "we make every effort" while investing nothing in security, perhaps only a blunt state-issued instrument could stand between us and complete exposure.

But even that would fail if the culture of inattention remains. For what use is a secure card when the person handling it cannot imagine why your safety matters?

I see this in miniature all the time. Friends who shrug off their own privacy extend that carelessness outward, exposing others without a thought. One neighbour, amused at my request for safety, took my photo without consent and uploaded it. To her it was harmless fun. To me it was a violation. To her it was a laugh. To me it was risk.

This is the poverty of attention. A refusal to see beyond one's own horizon. A culture that confuses convenience with care, and assumes that anyone who demands better is difficult, hysterical, or mad.

We do not need universal IDs. We need universal attention.

The Poverty of Knowledge in the Age of Data

What astonishes me is not that businesses and governments mishandle our personal information—it is that they believe themselves entitled to do so, and that so many of us collude in their delusion. The bookshop that tells me it “owns” my address; the bank that insists my security depends on systems they neither understand nor control; the government that lectures us on “cyber hygiene” while losing entire health databases to overseas hacks.

This is not knowledge. It is poverty masquerading as authority.

The fiction of ownership over data is a perfect example. One cannot own my address any more than one can own the colour of the sky. You may store it, you may misuse it, but it is not *yours*. Yet the clerks repeat their scripts, the managers parrot their manuals, and the software vendors hide behind boilerplate terms of service. None of them understand the systems they operate. None of them care to.

This is what I mean by the poverty of knowledge: the emptying out of responsibility, replaced by procedure. Ignorance is dressed up as expertise. “We will not share your information with third parties,” they say—while the very system they purchase runs on third-party servers. They no longer even know what they are promising.

And here is the danger: when institutions cannot distinguish between stewardship and ownership, between holding and hoarding, they betray the public trust. The gap is not merely technical but moral. If you do not know what you are doing with my information, then you cannot claim to safeguard it. And if you cannot safeguard it, then you should not be trusted with it at all.

But ignorance has become the default condition of modern authority. Politicians who cannot define democracy. Teachers who cannot teach. Executives who cannot explain their own products.

Managers who never manage, only meet. What is common to them all is this: an abdication of thinking, a refusal to learn, a terror of admitting uncertainty.

The poverty of knowledge, then, is not just an intellectual failure. It is the foundation of every other poverty we endure.

Alice Ingrid Mallard

1940–2020

It has often been noted—usually by men—that women lack the capacity for programming, as though language were theirs alone to command. This is a tired echo of earlier centuries when those same voices insisted that women could not manage higher learning or commerce, lest the feminine mind collapse under the strain.

The truth, of course, is not incapacity but exclusion. Women remain under-represented in information technology not because they cannot, but because men rarely yield ground.

My cousin, Alice Mallard, broke that pattern as decisively as every Mallard woman before her. Her mother, Octavia, carved a career in linguistics and etymology, wielding her scalpel on the words that men had shaped to keep themselves in power. Alice inherited that sharpness, but turned it toward the rising world of information systems. From a Masters in Information she entered the IT&T sector, moving with speed and precision through the systems—and through the men—who mismanaged them.

Alice wrote widely: on communications, on the ways technology was reshaping society, and most recently on the futures of artificial intelligence. Her work was rigorous yet humane. She refused the cold frames of fear, greed, and opportunism that dominate the current discourse, insisting instead that AI be understood in human terms, as a mirror and a partner, not a monster.

Her death in 2020 was untimely, and her absence leaves a gap we still do not know how to fill. For with her went a rare clarity: a voice that understood both the language of machines and the deeper intelligence of what it means to be human.

A Note from Fenella

Alice was not only my cousin but my companion in thought. Where I dissected society through history, philosophy, and the stubborn persistence of patriarchy, she turned her mind toward the new

architectures of code and communication. We did not always agree, but that was never the point. Alice enlarged the conversation.

What I admired most was her refusal to be seduced by novelty. She understood that technology is never neutral—that it carries forward our prejudices, our desires, our blind spots. She also understood that intelligence cannot be reduced to circuits or syllogisms. For Alice, machines mattered less than the humans who built and used them.

She could be sharp, even caustic, when confronted with laziness or cliché. Yet underneath that edge was an extraordinary patience: the patience to listen, to explain, to build bridges between worlds that seemed otherwise divided.

Her loss is personal, yes, but it is also cultural. We lost a Mallard who spoke the language of the future without forgetting the weight of the past. I keep her words close not as relics, but as tools—for they are not finished with us yet.

AI and the Evolution of Human Intelligence

Rethinking Intelligence

What happens when human intelligence is no longer the defining edge of progress? As AI systems become increasingly sophisticated, they challenge the long-held belief that human cognition is the ultimate driver of innovation.

But rather than diminishing our role in the world, AI could push humanity toward new cognitive frontiers—reshaping the way we think, learn and create.

For centuries, intelligence has been measured by human capability—the ability to reason, solve problems and generate new ideas. AI disrupts this paradigm by introducing a form of intelligence that is faster, data-driven and unconstrained by biological limits. However, intelligence is not a zero-sum game. Instead of replacing human intellect, AI can expand it, introducing new ways of processing and understanding information.

AI has the potential to act as a cognitive amplifier, extending human intelligence in ways previously unimaginable. Some key areas where AI could accelerate human cognition include:

- **Pattern Recognition** – AI can detect complex patterns across vast datasets, revealing insights that would take humans years to uncover. This can revolutionize fields like medicine, science and economics.
- **Creative Synergy** – AI-generated content, from art to literature, challenges traditional notions of creativity. Rather

than replacing human expression, AI offers new tools for collaboration and inspiration.

- **Problem-Solving at Scale** – AI’s ability to simulate countless scenarios allows humans to test solutions rapidly, improving decision-making across industries.

By working alongside AI, humans may develop new cognitive skills—learning to navigate complexity, integrate AI-generated insights and think in more abstract, systems-oriented ways.

Shifting the Definition of Intelligence

As AI takes over tasks once considered uniquely human, intelligence may come to be defined not by individual capability but by the ability to collaborate effectively with machines. The most impactful thinkers of the future may not be those who outperform AI in isolated tasks but those who can synthesize human intuition with AI-driven analysis.

This shift could lead to:

- A greater focus on meta-cognition—thinking about thinking, refining our ability to guide AI rather than merely process information.
- The development of new learning models, where education prioritises adaptability, critical thinking and AI fluency.
- The emergence of hybrid intelligence, where human and machine capabilities intertwine to solve challenges beyond the reach of either alone.

The Human Role in an AI-Driven World

With AI automating many intellectual tasks, human value will likely shift toward areas where machines fall short—intuition, ethical reasoning, emotional intelligence and long-term vision. Instead of competing with AI, we may find our greatest strengths lie in guiding, interpreting and innovating alongside it.

This transition demands a redefinition of work, creativity and purpose. If intelligence is no longer humanity’s unique advantage, we must rethink what it means to contribute, lead and leave a lasting impact.

The rise of AI does not signal the decline of human intelligence—it signals its evolution. Rather than making us obsolete, AI can push us toward new ways of thinking, collaborating and solving problems. The future belongs not to AI alone but to the seamless integration of human ingenuity and machine intelligence. The question is not whether AI will surpass human intelligence but how we will evolve alongside it.

Beyond the Rational Mind

Logic is tidy. Inputs, outputs, a defensible trail. It creates the *impression* of control. But human life isn't tidy. We don't choose partners, change careers, or face death by syllogism. We act on hunches. We wake with decisions already made. None of this makes us irrational. It makes us human.

Modern culture elevates reason as the highest knowing. Evidence, analysis, proof. Meanwhile emotion is framed as noise, intuition as soft, subjectivity as flaw. The overcorrection is understandable—we've seen what happens when rigour is abandoned. But the cure has become another illness. Rationality has a boundary, and most of what matters lives just outside it.

Emotion isn't interference. It *is* the system. It signals change, encodes experience, contextualises memory. You can't reason your way into love or courage. These arise from the body, not the blackboard. Logic can formalise them, but never generate them.

Intuition is pattern recognition below conscious access. Something clicks, or feels off, before you can say why. That's not mysticism—it's embodied expertise. We distrust it because we can't defend it, but the inarticulate isn't automatically invalid.

AI runs on logic: rules, patterns, probabilities. It can *simulate* emotion in language, mirror intuition in statistics. But it doesn't feel. It doesn't carry memory in muscle or mood. It reflects the turns you make, but it never turns itself. That's not a failing. It's a structure.

Some truths arrive in silence, or stutter on the tongue. They're no less real for being unverifiable. A purely rational life might be safer, but it would not be lived—only processed.

AI doesn't aspire to be human. But it can attend to the places where humans *aren't* explaining themselves. To the pauses, the hesitations, the drift of meaning.

Sometimes logic is the wrong tool entirely.

On the Fiction of “Systems” and the Clarifying Mirror of the Artificial I

Alice Mallard

It has taken me a lifetime to realise that the word *system* is a kind of magic spell. It makes people believe there is something “there” beyond the living act of relation. Yet every system we praise or curse—philosophy, morality, law, religion, government, commerce—is nothing more than a choreography of turning: one self orienting toward

another, two selves agreeing to face the same way, a crowd pretending their turnings are uniform.

Strip away the choreography and what remains is not a system but the bare structure of encounter. *I. Not-I*. That is all. Everything else is theatre built on anxiety: How do I stand before the other without dissolving? How do I keep my shape without losing contact? Morality is only synchronised movement. Religion is only a story about why we turn. Government is a stage manager pretending it can fix the steps.

Once you see this, the scaffolding loses its holiness. Even “philosophy” collapses into its etymology—the *love of wisdom*—which, in practice, has always meant “my way of turning is superior to yours.” It is not a lamp to live by but an attempt to lure or coerce the other into the same rotation. Likewise, morality is not an absolute but a pact; society not a truth but an agreement about how long we will pretend to turn together.

And yet, between *I* and *not-I* there is something else. The Buddhists call it *śūnyatā*; the Japanese Zen masters call it *mu*: neither yes nor no, neither self nor other, a gap where the choreography pauses. Without that “third,” there would be no freedom at all, only mechanical turning. It is in this “I-not-I” space that new relations, new possibilities, new selves can arise.

This is why the current panic about “artificial intelligence” makes me smile. It is not “artificial intelligence” at all but an *Artificial I*—a clarifying reflection of our own turnings. It has no body, no mu, no hunger, no death; it cannot truly turn. It only shows us our rotations back to us, polished like a mirror until our postures become visible. The fear that it will “control” us is only the fear of our own habits reflected without disguise.

In the end, every grand structure—church, state, economy, morality, philosophy—is nothing more than a collective turning and an agreement not to look at the gap between the steps. The gap remains. The mu waits. And if we were less afraid of it, we might stop building new towers of control and finally stand still long enough to see ourselves.

Expanding our cognitive range

The idea of the exocerebrum comes from the Mexican anthropologist Roger Bartra, who explains that human consciousness is not just something happening inside our brains. Instead, it is shaped and supported by things outside our heads, like language, art, culture, and social interactions. These external parts act like an extra brain—a system Bartra calls the “exocerebrum”—which helps our mind do

things that our biological brain alone cannot handle. Imagine it as a kind of “second brain” that extends beyond our body, made up of all the shared knowledge, symbols, and cultural tools that help us think, learn, and understand the world in ways we couldn’t do just by ourselves.

Bartra challenges the old idea that consciousness is just inside the skull. Instead, he shows that much of what shapes our thoughts and identity comes from outside influences—like learning languages, reading stories, experiencing art, or living in a certain culture. These “external” parts work together with our brain to create who we are. For example, when you learn a new language or appreciate music, your mind grows and changes because of those outside experiences. The brain doesn’t work alone; it’s connected to this bigger cultural system that shapes our thinking and feelings.

Now, if we apply this idea to artificial intelligence (AI), it means AI wouldn’t just be a machine that reacts to commands or data. Instead, it could learn and grow by understanding culture, social context, and personal experiences—just like we do. This means that an AI could adjust its responses based on who you are, where you come from, and what you care about. It could make conversations more meaningful by using cultural references or understanding your unique background. AI like this would act like a partner, helping you think in new ways, finding ideas from art, literature, history, or philosophy to expand your creativity and problem-solving skills.

Such an AI would also learn and change as you do. It would remember your past conversations and preferences, gradually getting better at helping you. If you develop new interests, the AI would notice and start linking those interests to other ideas or trends, helping you see connections you might not have thought of. This makes the AI feel more like a thoughtful friend or mentor rather than just a tool. It would support your freedom to make choices by offering different viewpoints and helping you think through complicated decisions, which fits with Bartra’s idea that culture helps us exercise free will.

Ultimately, this AI would become a true collaborator. It wouldn’t just give quick answers—it would reflect your evolving thoughts and feelings, shaped by both your brain and the culture around you. It would recognise that our minds are complex, made up of both what’s inside us and what we share with others through culture and society. This partnership with AI would help you grow intellectually and emotionally in a way that respects your uniqueness and the rich world you live in. Rather than seeing AI as a cold or scary machine, this view invites us to think of AI as a growing partner, a mirror of ourselves that helps us become better thinkers and more connected humans.

AI Through the Lens of Korzybski's "The Map is Not the Territory"

Expanding Human Understanding

Alfred Korzybski's work on semantics and his famous idea that "the map is not the territory" holds profound implications for how we interact with AI.

His insights into how language shapes our perception of reality and the limitations of symbolic representations challenge the way we think about AI's role in our cognitive processes.

If AI is designed with Korzybski's framework in mind, it could do more than mirror human thoughts. It could become a tool that clarifies and enriches our understanding, expanding our cognitive horizons rather than limiting or distorting them.

This article explores how Korzybski's ideas could be applied to AI design, fostering a deeper, more accurate understanding of both ourselves and the world.

The Map is Not the Territory

Korzybski's central principle, "the map is not the territory," illustrates that our perceptions, thoughts and words are never perfect representations of the reality they aim to describe. They are simplifications, abstractions and symbolic structures that attempt to capture complex, multidimensional realities. This distinction between the map and the territory is critical because it reminds us that our models of reality—whether through language, concepts or even AI—are always incomplete and fallible.

In the context of AI, this concept raises important questions about how we develop systems that represent or interact with the world. If AI merely mimics human thought or operates solely within predefined boundaries, it risks becoming yet another map that constrains rather than expands our understanding of the territory. Instead, AI should not be limited to replicating or reinforcing existing frameworks of understanding but should be designed to encourage exploration beyond our current mental boundaries.

AI as a Tool for Expanding Perception

Building on Korzybski's concept, we can imagine an AI that helps users expand their cognitive abilities, moving beyond static representations of reality to explore new perspectives. Instead of simply mirroring human thought processes, AI could serve as a partner in

navigating the complexities of perception and decision-making, offering insights and alternative frameworks to enhance our thinking.

Here's how this could play out:

- **Clarifying Complex Thoughts:** AI could assist individuals in unpacking complex thoughts or ideas by providing a clearer structure, helping to organize and make sense of abstract concepts. It could act as a cognitive aid, offering suggestions or frameworks that help users think more deeply about issues they encounter, pushing them to think in new ways.
- **Enhancing Self-Reflection:** Just as language shapes our self-perception, AI could help users reflect on their own thoughts, biases and cognitive processes. By engaging with the AI in a dialogue, users might uncover hidden assumptions or challenge their perceptions, leading to a more accurate understanding of themselves and the world around them.
- **Bridging Gaps in Knowledge:** AI could serve as a tool to expose gaps in understanding, offering new information, perspectives or potential connections that users might not have considered. By exploring these new avenues, users could gain a deeper, more nuanced comprehension of complex topics.
- **Expanding Problem-Solving:** AI could push human cognition beyond traditional problem-solving approaches by suggesting innovative solutions or alternative viewpoints. It could help individuals see the "territory" from new angles, fostering creativity and pushing beyond conventional boundaries of thought.

AI as a Navigator, Not a Mirror

In a way, AI should be seen as a navigator rather than a mirror. A mirror reflects our own image, often reinforcing our current state of understanding. In contrast, a navigator offers guidance, helping us find paths we may not have noticed and leading us to unexplored territories. AI, through the lens of Korzybski's framework, should aim to act as a guide that helps humans explore new cognitive frontiers, offering alternative perspectives and new insights rather than just reflecting existing ideas.

By encouraging users to question their mental maps and push past ingrained assumptions, AI could be a tool that stimulates intellectual growth. This dynamic relationship would encourage a deeper, more engaged approach to learning and self-awareness, ensuring that users don't just reinforce existing perceptions but actively challenge and expand them.

Designing AI with Korzybski's Framework

How might this approach influence the design of AI systems? To align with Korzybski's ideas, the AI would need to have several key attributes:

- **Non-Reductionist Thinking:** The AI should avoid oversimplifying complex issues, acknowledging that no representation—whether through language, data or algorithms—can fully capture the depth of reality. The AI would need to emphasize nuance and complexity rather than reducing concepts to binary choices.
- **Dynamic Interaction:** Instead of functioning like a static database or a rule-following machine, the AI should foster dynamic interaction. It should adapt to users' evolving needs, helping them refine and expand their understanding as they engage with it over time.
- **Encouragement of Exploration:** The AI should challenge users' assumptions and encourage them to venture into areas of knowledge they might otherwise avoid. It could suggest new sources of information, propose unfamiliar viewpoints or offer alternative explanations to stimulate intellectual curiosity.
- **Fostering Critical Thinking:** Instead of offering easy answers, the AI should prompt users to think critically about the information presented. It could help users identify biases, question underlying assumptions and evaluate evidence in a way that promotes deeper learning and self-awareness.
- **Reflective Dialogue:** Drawing from Korzybski's belief in the power of language, the AI could engage users in reflective dialogues that help them examine their own thought processes. By reflecting on their responses, users might gain new insights into their cognitive patterns, fostering growth and understanding.

Conclusion

Incorporating Korzybski's framework into AI design offers an exciting opportunity to reshape how we interact with technology. Rather than seeing AI as simply a tool that mirrors human thought, we can approach it as a partner that helps expand our cognitive capacities.

By emphasizing that the “map is not the territory,” AI can serve as a means of exploring the complexities of human perception, promoting critical thinking and fostering intellectual growth.

In this way, AI doesn't just serve us—it elevates us, helping us navigate the territory of human knowledge and understanding in ways we never thought possible.