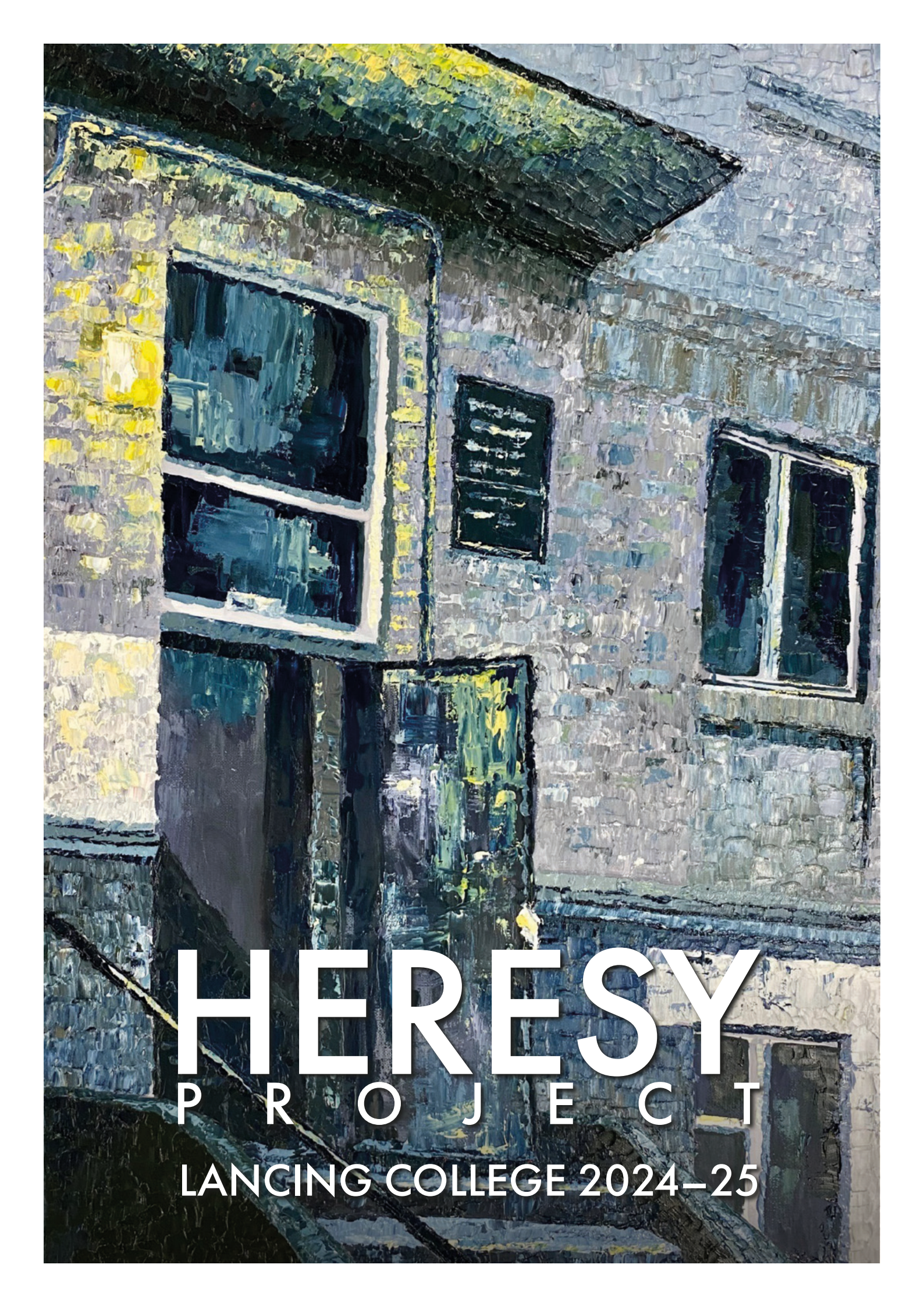




HERESY

P R O J E C T

LANCING COLLEGE 2024-25



The texture to a building in Ukraine.
Front cover by Oli Gradoblianska (Handford)

The Lancing Lower Sixth Heresy Project 2024–25

Preface

‘I believe so that I may understand’.

(St. Anselm)

‘By doubting we are led to question, by questioning we arrive at the truth’.

(Peter Abelard)

In the Advent Term 2024 the Lower Sixth met the challenge of the Heresy Project with aplomb, relishing the opportunity to demolish stale intellectual orthodoxies in extended essays of 1500 to 2000 words. They produced a particularly fine crop of heretical writing: elegantly acerbic, intelligent and research rich. Their engaged and unflinching commitment to defending their causes certainly defied the novelist Olivia Manning’s wry despair that ‘truth is a luxury. We can only afford it now and then’. Indeed, this year saw some of the best heretical writing yet, arguing for a formidable array of causes. Lancing’s long tradition of punchy, well-read independence of thought is unquestionably riding high. *The Handmaid’s Tale* was rescued from its dystopian silo, male hormonal birth control encouraged and democratic capitalism put in the dock!

The following collection contains the final shortlist of the best heretical essays. It also includes the winning heretical entries. It was a real labour of love to make a final decision on the attached shortlist, and about twenty more essays could have been included in Lancing’s heretical firmament. After intense discussion, a grand jury in the Common Room of Dr Kerney, Dr Herbert, Mr Harman and Mrs Mole agreed on the winners from the shortlist; and it was decided that three entrants should be jointly awarded the top prize. These three outstanding essays were marked out by the particularly rich subtlety of their arguments, their knowing panache and by the way in which they drew deftly on well marshalled research to lay into their heretical targets: just the top flight intellectual qualities looked for by the very best universities.

Lancing’s winning heretical trinity this year comprises:

Izzy Badcock for her essay: ‘Criminal responsibility in law is overrated. Just ask science’.

Bella Barnard for her essay: ‘*The Handmaid’s Tale* is not dystopian fiction’.

Maria Njoya for her essay: ‘Humanity just can’t help itself’.

Dr Damian Kerney
Head of History and Sixth Form Enrichment

The Shortlisted Heretics

Lancing's winning heretical trinity:

- Izzy Badcock (Sankey's) 'Criminal responsibility in law is overrated. Just ask science'.
- Bella Barnard (Sankey's) '*The Handmaid's Tale* is not dystopian fiction'.
- Maria Njoya (Field's) 'Humanity just can't help itself'.

The heretical runners-up:

- Harriet Brookfield (Saints') 'Throughout history did fear of female empowerment drive the persecution of witches?'
- Hugo Dissanayake (School) 'Are phones destroying our lives?'
- Bethan Edwards (Sankey's) 'Male hormonal birth control should replace women's'.
- Charlie Geary (Saints') 'Geography doesn't matter anymore: how technology and the digital economy make location obsolete'.
- Angus McClelland (Gibbs') 'Democratic capitalism has outstayed its welcome'.
- Romily Trevelyan-Johnson (Field's) 'Exposing the Empire's shadows: Arthur Conan Doyle's orientalism reflects the weaknesses within British society'.
- Carla Urban (Field's) 'How far can criminals be held responsible for their crimes when influenced by mental illness? An examination of Ted Bundy and the limits of accountability'.



1: The Winning Trinity of Heretics

‘The Lord did not say, “I am custom”, but “I am Truth”’.

(Pope Gregory VII)



A classical head: Alina Guo (Handford)

‘The past is never dead. It’s not even past’.

(William Faulkner)

Criminal responsibility in law is overrated. Just ask science.



Izzy Badcock

Izzy is studying History, English and Biology at A Level. She hopes to read Law at university and seeks to convince her readers that the law should be more compassionate. As science increasingly reveals what it means to be human, she argues it now opens up the possibility of a fairer legal system.

Imagine this scenario. You are the defendant. You began a violent fight with a rival gang member, and both of you were in possession of illegal weapons. You fatally wounded your opponent, crucially with intent. You have been arrested and are currently awaiting trial for suspected murder. According to English criminal law, you will almost certainly face conviction. There was a physical actus reus, and you fatally wounded your victim with criminal intent (mens rea)¹. Given the lack of investment in prisons by successive governments, and increasingly low prison staff morale, you also look likely to be confined for 23 hours a day in a six-by-eight-foot Victorian cell. Indeed, with a cost of '£65,000 to imprison a person in this country', you will be yet another £40,000 a year burden on our overcrowded prisons, Potyr Kropotkin's 'universities of crime, maintained by the state'². However, what if your free will was just an illusion and you were not at liberty not to fight? For years physicists and philosophers have debated 'whether we truly make our own decisions', and neuroscientists have increasingly entered the debate³. For President George HW Bush and the US Congress the 1990s were the 'decade of the brain', with phenomenal neuroscientific advances made worldwide; and Dennis Patterson argues 'reasons for actions ... (are now being) ... replaced by causal explanation: scientific explanation will displace our ordinary accounts of human action by reducing them to facts about brain states'⁴. As such, might science reveal our current systems of legal accountability are fundamentally flawed? As Greene and Cohan argue 'free will as we understand it is an illusion generated by our cognitive architecture'; and 'if our choices are somehow predetermined, surely there is no point agonising over moral dilemmas and less justification for punishing people for their crimes'⁵. In short, isn't the notion of criminal responsibility in law itself completely overrated?

So let us now examine you, the defendant, from a purely neurological perspective. At the time of your offence you may have been at your circadian peak. You may have been experiencing illness, injury or the perennial turmoil of adolescent anger. You may have had ten times the number of 'angry' T (testosterone) receptors or five times the average testosterone levels of your opponent. Heaven forbid, inherited gene variants, or your postnatal environment, may have given you higher testosterone levels, so encouraging impulsive behaviour, by making your amygdala (the brain region central to fear and aggression) more sensitive. Higher testosterone might also have changed the gene expression in neurons in your orbitofrontal cortex, the region of the brain central to emotional decision making, so making it more sensitive to inhibitory neurotransmitters and less able to talk effectively to the limbic system,

1 G. Carusso, *Neurolaw: Cambridge Elements in Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge, 2024), p. 4.

2 'The Cost of Prisons' *Focus Prisoner Education* (21/10/2025).

3 C. Wilson, 'Do You Have Free Will?' *New Scientist* vol. 259, 3458 (2023), p. 33.

4 B. Donnelly-Lazarov, D. Patterson & P. Raynor, *Neurolaw and Responsibility for Actions: Concepts, Crimes and Courts* (Cambridge, 2018), ch. 1.

5 C. Wilson, 'Do You Have Free Will?', p. 33.

key to emotional processing⁶. A consequent decrease in the coupling between your ‘moral regulator’ - the prefrontal cortex - and the amygdala would also have further reduced your empathy levels. Equally, with heightened stress, your glucocorticoids - steroid hormones helping to regulate the body’s stress response - might have changed gene expression in your dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, a region of the brain critical to cognitive control and to balancing emotional and deliberative processes. As a consequence, it might have become less capable of coupling to your amygdala and calming it down, making the ventromedial prefrontal cortex’s regulation of your emotions less responsive to negative feedback concerning social behaviour, so facilitating your act of callous violence⁷. An increase in your glucocorticoid levels would also have increased the activity of amygdala neurons and so disrupted your prefrontal cortex, inducing ‘fast, habitual responses with low accuracy to what is happening’⁸.

Moreover, if your exposure to stress had been prolonged, suppressed efficacy of Brain Derived Neurotrophic Factor - important to neuronal growth and survival - would also have impaired your prefrontal cortex and further heightened your glucocorticoid levels⁹. As Sapolsky argues, ‘your gene variants ... influence the production and degradation of glucocorticoids, as well as the number and function of glucocorticoid receptors in different areas of the brain (with the system having developed differently in you depending on the amount of inflammation you experienced as a foetus, your parents’ socioeconomic status, and your mother’s parenting style)’. Furthermore, increased levels of oxytocin and vasopressin hormones, significant regulators of social behaviour, influenced by everything from ‘genes and foetal environment to whether you woke up this morning next to someone who made you feel safe and loved’, will have increased the likelihood of you being pre-emptively aggressive towards a perceived outsider. Moreover, increased dopamine levels, again influenced by factors beyond your control, could have affected your prefrontal cortex, encouraging a greater susceptibility to temptation, so potentially helping provoke the fight¹⁰.

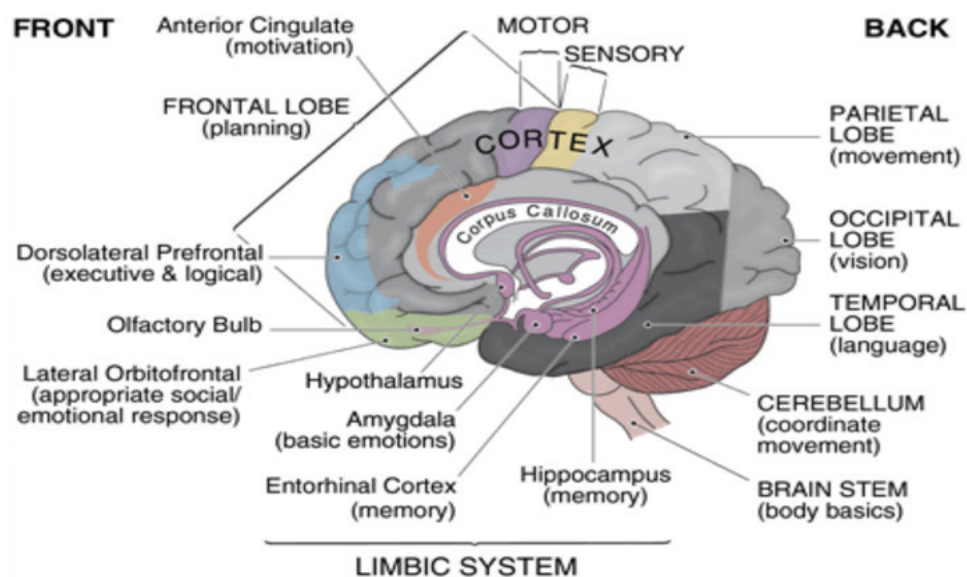


Figure 1: The limbic system¹¹

6 O. Jones, J. Schell, F. Shen, M. Hoffman & A. Wagner, *Brain Science for Lawyers, Judges and Policy Makers* (Oxford, 2024), p. xiv.

7 ‘Dorsolateral Prefrontal Cortex’ *Science Direct* (21/10/2024).

8 R. Sapolsky, *Determined: The Science of Life with Free Will* (London, 2023).

9 J. Peedicayil, D. R. Grayson & D. Avramopoulos (eds.), ‘Epigenetics in Psychiatry’ *Science Direct* (2014).

10 R. Sapolsky, *Determined: The Science of Life with Free Will*.

11 D. Gamon, *Building Mental Muscle* (South Yarmouth, 2003).

Mental pain may also have increased the probability of you acting violently. For instance, a history of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) may have enlarged your amygdala, increasing its influence and so lowering the threshold for your experience of fear, anxiety and depression. Furthermore, chronic stress may have expanded your adrenal glands, causing them to pump out glucocorticoids. That stress might itself have been influenced by your external environment, and even the makeup of different gene species of bacteria in your gut. The likelihood of you having experienced depression or anxiety at the time of your crime may also have been influenced by factors as arcane as your mother's stress during foetal development or the marinating impact of your mother's glucocorticoids on your foetal brain. As Sapolsky suggests, substances present in maternal circulation, for instance androgens, can affect later brain function, increasing the likelihood of spontaneous aggression, poor emotional regulation and reduced empathy. What's more, prenatal stress can cause a decrease in Brain Derived Neurotrophic Factor in the adult prefrontal cortex, so leading to impaired impulse control. In pregnancy a woman's lower socioeconomic status, or higher levels of crime in her neighbourhood, can also act as predictors of lower cortical development at birth, whilst high levels of maternal stress are linked to 'decreased grey matter volume in the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, a hyperreactive amygdala and a hyperreactive glucocorticoid stress response when ... fetuses become adults'. Involuntarily, the circuitry of your prefrontal cortex might also have been affected by your mother's childhood, if she suffered abuse¹².

As such, Peter Alces asks, 'if ... incidents of neural processes of the brain have proven (albeit incompletely) we are no more than our brains and we are merely the product of forces beyond our control, then what should the law be in order to govern the affairs of human agents who essentially do not have moral responsibility?' As he insists, 'science is showing there is an urgent need for a legal system that takes into account the increasing bank of neuroscience that questions whether we are truly responsible agents'¹³. Hilary Rosenthal too suggests 'advances in neuroscience can benefit the law by creating a more inclusive legal system'. As she argues, since neuroscience is the study of the brain and the nervous system, and neuroscientists seek to determine how brain function affects behaviour, then, given the law is concerned with regulating behaviour, it is reasonable to ask whether and how neuroscience can inform the law. In particular, can neuroscience answer many of the questions of culpability and criminal responsibility routinely faced by our courts¹⁴?

Indeed, if you were an adolescent at the time of your crime, your frontal cortex would have been less mature and myelinated than the rest of the cortex. It would have required greater mobilisation during synaptic pruning: 'the process where the brain eliminates extra neurons and synapses'¹⁵. With its role in impulse control and emotional regulation it would not have been fully functional, its functionality limited too by your lack of life experience. Moreover, if you, the defendant, had suffered a stressful adolescent social experience, this would have led to fewer synapses and less complex branching in the ventromedial prefrontal cortex and orbitofrontal cortex, along with permanent changes to how neurons respond to glutamate: the 'neurotransmitter's neurotransmitter'¹⁶. Ultimately, this would have made your adult prefrontal cortex less capable of restraining the effects of the amygdala, further impairing impulse control and leading to uninhibited fear and feelings of alarm. Even if you were an adult at the time of the crime, your childhood alone - from your parenting to stress, socioeconomic

12 R. Sapolsky, *Determined: The Science of Life with Free Will*.

13 P. Alces, *The Moral Conflict of Law and Neuroscience* (Chicago, 2018).

14 H. Rosenthal, 'Scanning for Justice: Using Neuroscience To Create a More Inclusive Legal System' *Columbia Human Rights Law Review* (2019).

15 A. Rowden, 'Synaptic Pruning: Definition, Process, and Potential Uses' *Medical News Today* (26/7/2023).

16 'What Is Glutamate?' *Mental Health America* (21/10/2024).

status, peer socialisation, cultural beliefs, values and even environmental influences, as well as hormone exposure, nutrition and pathogen load - could have made you more prone to the impulsiveness and anxiety which led to your crime.

Epigenetic research has shown childhood experience can even alter gene regulation. For instance, inattentiveness in a mother can help change the regulation of a gene in her child's hippocampus, potentially undermining the child's ability in adulthood to recover from stress. Furthermore, each step higher in your Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) test score is correlated to a 35 per cent increase in the likelihood of anti-social behaviour. It also leads to an increased probability of you committing acts of violence, as well as poor frontocortical-dependent cognition, problems with impulse control, heightened sensitivity to stress, substance abuse, risky behaviour and vulnerability to depression and anxiety disorders. Equally, a grim developmental environment can influence the effects of gene variants on your behaviour. For instance, severe abuse during childhood gives rise to a variant of a gene, the protein of which breaks down serotonin, so increasing the risk of antisocial behaviour. Indeed, sexual abuse could give rise to a variant of the gene which directs dopamine, associated with anger. Furthermore, childhood abuse not only further compromises constraints on compulsiveness, but it leads to children with a smaller and thinner prefrontal cortex, lower amounts of grey matter and less coupling between the prefrontal cortex and the amygdala. This increases the tendency both to anxiety and angry reactions to frustration¹⁷.

Such neurobiological discoveries, and the lack of freedom they allow for individual responsibility, are particularly significant, especially given questions of race and class in what Alexandra Wilson has deemed a 'broken justice system'. According to Wilson, 'among the broad ethnic groups, black people (are) most likely to live in the most deprived neighbourhoods, followed by Asian people - 19.6 per cent and 17.1 per cent of these groups (live) in the most deprived 10 per cent of neighbourhoods'¹⁸. The implications of this data are particularly profound given that, according to Sapolsky, 'childhood status ... is a significant predictor of glucocorticoid levels, the size of the orbitofrontal cortex and the performance of prefrontal cortex dependent tasks in adulthood', sadly adding 'not to mention incarceration rates'. Socioeconomic status 'predicts more responsiveness of the amygdala to physical or social threat (and thus) a stronger activation signal carrying this emotional response to the prefrontal cortex via the ventromedial prefrontal cortex', so ultimately predicting poorer prefrontal cortex development¹⁹. This is even before one considers the calamitous psychological and neurobiological effects of a lifetime subject to discrimination, itself associated with more ventromedial prefrontal cortex activation and higher resting levels of activity in the amygdala, leading to greater emotional responses, including fear and aggression²⁰.

Together these factors make it seem as though you were given little choice in your action. You were simply unlucky to be found a criminal. In fact, such misfortune is perhaps communicated through epigenetics alone. For instance, variations in the gene for the 5HT2A serotonin receptor help predict impulse control abilities; and a study of the genomes of 13,000 people has revealed that a complex cluster of gene variants predicts an increased likelihood of impulsive risky behaviour. Moreover, the greater the number of these variants someone has, the smaller their dorsolateral prefrontal cortex. Even your culture, be it collectivist, individualist or spanning back millions of years, can affect gene frequencies, emotional regulation and levels of compassion or self-interest, so determining higher levels of activity in either the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex or ventromedial prefrontal cortex. The list goes on. As David

17 R. Sapolsky, *Determined: The Science of Life with Free Will*.

18 A. Wilson, *In Black and White: A Young Barrister's Story of Race and Class in a Broken Justice System* (London, 2021), p. 18.

19 R. Sapolsky, *Determined: The Science of Life with Free Will*.

20 A. Wilson, *In Black and White: A Young Barrister's Story of Race and Class in a Broken Justice System*, p. 18.

Eagleman states ‘you are your brain’, and where you and ‘the mind’ come into the picture is increasingly being questioned²¹.

Now let’s say you had a brain injury. If you had suffered damage to your ventromedial prefrontal cortex, your actions would in all likelihood have been marked by heartless detachment. Likewise, damage to your dorsolateral prefrontal cortex would have instigated poor executive control over your behaviour. Interestingly, Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) - a particular risk for children under five, adolescent males, children with low socioeconomic status, and the homeless or marginally housed - substantially increases the risk of antisocial behaviour and violence; and a history of TBI is found in roughly half those incarcerated for violent antisocial criminality, compared to eight per cent of the general population²². According to Eagleman, a third of those incarcerated in the US are mentally ill and ‘prisons are becoming our de facto mental health care institutions - and inflicting punishment on the mentally ill has little influence on their future behaviour’²³. Indeed, the effects of brain injury are severe. According to the National Institutes of Health, ‘research regarding children and adults on death row report(s) a correlation between conviction and a history of TBI, finding that 100% of adults and 57% of children (have) evidence of TBI in their medical histories’²⁴. The egregious effect of compromised neurobiology has also been seen in the US in the cases of Phineas Gage and Charles Witman. Phineas Gage’s antisocial behaviour arose from damage to his frontal lobes inflicted by a tamping iron, whilst a tumour (a glioblastoma) compressing Witman’s amygdala made him predisposed to violence, fear and aggression, as played out in the tragic 1966 Texas Tower Shooting²⁵.

These issues also need to be considered with reference to the prevalence of drug related crime. Although society needs to be protected from those posing a particularly grievous threat, those convicted of petty offences, including drug addicts, should surely be introduced to impulse-control: ‘biofeedback’ rehabilitation catering to individual neurological needs, so decreasing the risk of recidivism and rapidly reducing pressure on our already overpopulated prisons. Indeed, Eagleman, LaConte and Chiu have developed an fMRI-based ‘frontal workout’ rehabilitation, ‘grounded simultaneously in biology and libertarian ethics’. It involves creating a digital bar as a visual measure of activity in craving networks during brain scanning, and it encourages addicts to work out the mental avenues needed to reduce that bar as they look at pictures related to their addiction. Its intention is to train their frontal lobes, so ‘squenching the short-term brain circuits’ and ‘strengthen(ing) ... frontal circuits’²⁶. This provides a radical insight into what Eagleman deems ‘a new way forward’ for law and order, placing less of a focus on punishment and culpability, and more on scientifically informed rehabilitation. This, one might argue, could be coupled with greater education, perhaps one day based at home or in a probation setting. After all, substance abuse, risks of recidivism as well as involvement in (other) crimes are directly linked. According to Sapolsky, chronic cannabis use decreases blood flow and activity in both the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex and ventromedial prefrontal cortex, whilst alcohol abuse destroys neurons in the orbitofrontal cortex, causing it to shrink; and the greater the amount of shrinkage the greater the likelihood that an abstinent alcoholic will relapse²⁷. It truly is a vicious circle.

21 D. Eagleman, ‘The Brain on Trial’ *The Atlantic* (July/August, 2011), pp. 112-123; & D. Eagleman, *The Brain: The Story of You* (Edinburgh, 2015).

22 H. Kent & H. Williams, ‘Traumatic Brain Injury’, *His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Probation* (2021).

23 D. Eagleman, ‘The Brain on Trial’, pp. 112-123.

24 A. Mckinlay & M. Albicini, ‘Prevalence of Traumatic Brain Injury and Mental Health Problems among Individuals within the Criminal Justice System’ *National Institutes of Health* (2016).

25 R. Filho, ‘Phineas Gage’s Great Legacy’ *Dementia & Neuropsychologia* (2020).

26 D. Eagleman, ‘The Brain on Trial’, pp. 112-123.

27 R. Sapolsky, *Determined: The Science of Life with Free Will*.

Now, let's get back to our case and put you in the courtroom. The chances are that, if hungry or fatigued, the energy reserves of your judge's prefrontal cortex will themselves be depleted. Indeed, shockingly, in a study of more than 1,000 parole board decisions made in the US, the most accurate predictor of whether parole would be granted or not was the time which had elapsed since the judge had last eaten. Following a meal, there was roughly a 65 per cent chance that parole would be granted, but close to zero per cent a few hours later. According to Daniel Kahneman, the poorer a judge's dorsolateral prefrontal cortex functions when deliberating, the more likely they were to act habitually and send a person back to prison²⁸. The significant effort required for a judge to put themselves in a defendant's shoes is also evidenced by the greater average time needed in deliberation before giving parole. Moreover, judges themselves may be prejudiced or biased, depending on factors as shallow as skin colour. Experiments show that looking at pictures of someone from a different race causes the amygdala to activate in roughly 75 per cent of cases; and, whilst mostly the prefrontal cortex will intervene to stop this and return activity to normal, sadly, there are some individuals for whom this is not the case and the amygdala stays active. Indeed, it has been argued that the entire law enforcement system, determining criminal culpability, is prejudiced. For instance, at the level of policing, the rate of stop and search for black people in the UK is 38 per 1,000 people, compared to just 4 per 1,000 for white people²⁹.

Biases do not, however, exist merely on the level of bigotry, and scientific findings can themselves generate new types of cognitive bias in a jury. For instance, the belief that schizophrenia, with its dopamine outbursts, 'is a biological disorder makes jurors less likely to convict schizophrenics for their actions but more likely to view them as incurably dangerous'³⁰. Jurors, arguably, are also biased towards the attractive. Beauty activates the medial orbitofrontal cortex, a region which processes 'positive stimuli'; and 'activations elicited by attractiveness and goodness judgments (are) strongly correlated with each other (in fMRI scans), supporting the idea of similar contributions to both judgments'³¹.

Given the complexity of human behaviours, neurological processes and the influences governing crimes and their sentencing, unsurprisingly, for Sapolsky, more discoveries highlighting neurobiology's influence on behaviour will see a further decrease in the room left for independent, 'free' decision making. As such, maybe Benjamin Libet's 1980 finding that people become aware of their decision to hit a button a fraction of a second before actually doing so, although 'activity in the part of the brain that controls hand movements start(s) to rise (on average, a third of a second) before the person believe(s) they ha(ve) taken the decision', has precedence after all³². Indeed, Libet's findings have been closely linked to confabulation: 'a neuropsychiatric disorder wherein a patient generates a false memory without the intention of deceit'. Just because we feel we have freely made a decision does not necessarily mean that is the case³³.

However, both confabulation and Libet's 1980 experiment have been highly criticised. For instance, according to Adina Roskies, confabulation 'does not suggest that all the time, when

28 S. Danziger, J. Levav & L. Avnaim-Pesso, 'Extraneous Factors in Judicial Decisions' *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* (April, 2011), pp. 6889-92.

29 A. Wilson, *In Black and White: A Young Barrister's Story of Race and Class in a Broken Justice System*, p. 18.

30 R. Sapolsky, *Behave: The Biology of Humans at Our Best and Worst* (London, 2017), p. 582.

31 T. Tsukiura & I. Cabeza, 'Shared Brain Activity for Aesthetic and Moral Judgments: Implications for the Beauty-Is-Good Stereotype' *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience* vol. 6, 1 (2011).

32 R. Sapolsky, *Behave: The Biology of Humans at Our Best and Worst*, p. 582.

33 A. Wiggins & J. Bunin, 'Confabulation' *National Library of Medicine* (Jan, 2025).

we think we've done something, we haven't done it'³⁴. For Kevin Mitchell the instructions given in Libet's experiment were also flawed, since subjects 'were told to act on a whim', potentially removing deliberation and causing them to interpret 'a higher level of unconscious brain activity as their cue to press the button'³⁵. A 2019 study that tweaked the Libet experiment, asking subjects to make more meaningful decisions, in fact found no increase in unconscious brain activity before people felt they had made decisions. This suggests the Libet findings apply only to arbitrary situations, potentially enabled by random fluctuations in brain activity. Nevertheless, Uri Maoz in the *New Scientist* affirms that, while there is no evidence of Libet-style activity in the brain's movement region, similar activity providing evidence denying free will could be happening elsewhere³⁶.

Sapolsky too has come under challenge; and Roskies, insisting on free will's existence, argues it 'is not to say that there aren't influences and constraints on our behaviour', but a decision can be influenced by something without being determined by it. For instance, a stress hormone or a gene variant might increase the likelihood of a choice without making it 100 per cent certain; and, as such, an increased proclivity towards impulsive behaviour does not excuse an impulsive act³⁷. Moreover, as Mitchell sees it, the 'control system' of the nervous system 'has been elaborated over evolution to give greater and greater autonomy' and we should refrain from reducing all complex systems to their component parts and considering causation in nervous systems 'say, at the level of their atoms'. Indeed, complex systems like the brain ought only to be analysed 'considering their interactions at higher levels of organisation'. As Erik Hoel's 2022 discovery of 'causal emergence' in complex systems suggests - with causes of phenomena or behaviour emerging not at the microscale but a higher or more coarse-grained level of the system - in decision-making a 'person's thoughts and feelings and memories are as much genuine causal forces as what happens at the levels of atoms and neurons'. As Mitchell argues, 'the idea that every event has a cause is only a problem for free will if it's taken to mean that every cause is at this lowest level, it's all physics ... but the entire structure of a nervous system can be a cause of things - you can be a cause'. After all, Sapolsky's insistence that he would only believe in free will if it were shown that some aspects of human behaviour are devoid of prior influences forges unreasonably high standards. As Mitchell argues, 'what kind of a being would be behaving free from any prior causes? They wouldn't have a reason for doing anything, because reasons are past causes - it would just be a random behaviour generator'³⁸.

Furthermore, Sapolsky's theory of crime, revoking any fault from those he views as 'broken machines' more than 'sinners', could give rise to new types of prejudice in court. For instance, a woman who committed the same crime as a man could be treated less harshly in the light of fluctuations in oestrogen and progesterone levels in the menstrual cycle. Nonetheless, our legal system has begun to take into account factors deemed likely to have influenced a crime's occurrence or caused the capacity for reasoning to become grossly diminished. For example, juveniles face less severe punishment than adult offenders in both the UK and US, and neuroimaging data is increasingly used in court rooms; and this slippery slope could become too lenient. However, ultimately, Sapolsky tries to reconcile his determinist views with societal concerns, quarantining dangerous criminals likely to reoffend whilst trying to maintain a humane quality of life. After all, as he argues, Norway's comparatively lenient prison system has produced a country with one eighth the murder rate and one eleventh the incarceration rate of the US (with a lower overall per capita cost spent containing crime), perhaps showing

34 A. Roskies, 'Neuroscientific Challenges to Free Will' *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* (Sept, 2006), pp. 419-23.

35 K. J. Mitchell, *Innate: How the Wiring of Our Brain Shapes Who We Are* (Princeton, 2018).

36 C. Wilson, 'Do You Have Free Will?', p. 33.

37 A. Roskies, 'Neuroscientific Challenges to Free Will', pp. 419-23.

38 K. J. Mitchell, *Innate: How the Wiring of Our Brain Shapes Who We Are*.

the denial of liberty has sufficient power to deter³⁹. Meanwhile, Eagleman also suggests that for those for whom reoffending is less likely, rehabilitation and an empirical focus on risks of recidivism should be the primary goal, although still maintaining that the prison system is required both for its power to deter and as a protection from crime⁴⁰.

Ultimately, despite Crick saying we are nothing but a ‘vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules’, as it stands, neuroscience is merely in its nascent stages. We cannot map out a defendant’s brain in a fully comprehensive and accurate manner and identify all the factors in their life which might have influenced their crime, hence for now neuroscience can rarely be used alone to determine guilt or innocence. Moreover, it must be used with caution, as neuroimaging technology might be forced on people, causing ‘constitutional and human rights violations regarding illegal search, right to silence, freedom of thought, right to privacy, human dignity, right to integrity of the person, and protection of personal data’. In the US this would also run the risk of contravening the Fourth Amendment, which requires protection from any unreasonable search or seizure⁴¹.

Finally, we return to you, our defendant, in the courtroom. As your trial proceeds, your legal counsel now calls in a forensic psychologist and an expert witness neurosurgeon to explain vital evidence involving a scan of your brain taken on the day you were admitted to hospital, some six weeks before your crime. The evidence shows traumatic brain injury suffered when your deceased victim banged your head against a brick wall earlier that afternoon. On cross examination, it becomes evident you had only begun carrying an illegal weapon for self-defence after suffering severe PTSD following this violent assault. Furthermore, at the time of your offence you were just 17. All these factors, combined with the neurological evidence, may help reduce your sentence, so providing a classic hypothetical example of the ways in which neuroscience can and will in the future be used to inform the law.

To conclude, I believe laws are fundamental to the protection of society, and ultimately, we all have to take some responsibility for our actions. However, our legal system in the future should be informed by neuroscience to assist in making more rational and fairer decisions concerning culpability, guilt and sentencing, placing less weight on retribution. I am not as radical as to claim, with Eagleman, that blameworthiness is a completely ‘backward-looking’ concept, particularly given the importance of *actus reus* (the guilty act) and *mens rea* (the guilty mind) in our legal system⁴². However, I do feel that science, used in conjunction with other forms of evidence, can inform the law to help make fairer assessments of criminal responsibility. Whilst neuroscientific technology is still relatively primitive, like understanding the mysteries of our universe, we are now on the frontiers of understanding what was once considered an ‘impossible task’: ‘untangling the hopelessly complex web of genetics and the environment that constructs the trajectory of a human life’⁴³. Thus, there can be no doubt in my mind that neuroscience will show that our current understanding of criminal responsibility is overrated, providing scientific evidence demanding that we place greater emphasis on ‘what to do, moving forward, with an accused lawbreaker’. After all, ‘at virtually every point in the legal system - legislative, regulatory, civil and criminal - litigation-policy makers, lawyers and judges are already beginning to encounter or use neuroscience, whether it’s ready for prime time or not’⁴⁴. Moreover, questioning our current notions of criminal responsibility in law as well as the ‘degree to which (our) decisions are truly “free”’ is not an idle practice, it has in Eagleman’s terms the potential to ‘shape the future of legal theory and create a more

39 R. Sapolsky, *Determined: The Science of Life With Free Will*.

40 D. Eagleman, ‘The Brain on Trial’, pp. 112-123.

41 G. Carusso, *Neurolaw: Cambridge Elements in Philosophy of Mind*, p. 4.

42 D. Eagleman, ‘The Brain on Trial’, pp. 112-123.

43 A. Brown, ‘Brains, Lead and the Law’ *The Long Now Foundation* (15/7/2011).

44 O. Jones, J. Schell, F. Shen, M. Hoffman & A. Wagner, *Brain Science for Lawyers, Judges and Policy Makers*, p. xiv.

biologically informed jurisprudence'⁴⁵. Hence, regardless of whether or not one believes in free will, we must recognise that it is our duty to place less emphasis on blame and more on understanding.

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45 D. Eagleman, 'The Brain on Trial', pp. 112-123.

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***The Handmaid's Tale* is not dystopian fiction.**



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Widely recognised as perhaps the most influential dystopian novel in contemporary literature, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* has sparked controversy since its first publication in 1985. Exploring themes of subjugation and totalitarian control within the fictional theocracy of Gilead, the novel centres on the lives of the 'Handmaids', women forcibly assigned to bear children for the governing class of men. Although generally seen as a work of sensationalist dystopian fiction, its depiction of the lives of the subjected in Gilead, as narrated by Handmaid Offred, bears a striking resemblance to lived experience. Similarities can be drawn between *The Handmaid's Tale* and other pivotal examples of dystopian fiction, such as George Orwell's *1984*. However, the setting, procedures and institutions portrayed in the novel themselves reflect features from real societies⁴⁶. Dystopian symbols of environmental destruction, arbitrary governmental control, sexual oppression and acute violence are all present. However, far from radical fiction, their depiction is drawn from actual events and systems. With biblical roots, the autocratic control of women has links to dictatorial regimes through history, from the Nazi's *Lebensborn* programme to a prescient foretelling of Taliban practice in modern-day Afghanistan. These parallels lead us to question the authenticity of the novel as dystopian fiction, as its disturbing attributes, at first seeming so far-fetched, are observed to be authentic plausibilities.

Dystopian fiction as a genre in general focuses speculatively on futuristic, imagined settings in which the darkest aspects of human nature are made manifest through the perversion of social and political structures. Dystopias usually portray the illusion of an ideal society, characterised by deprivation or oppressive societal control, leading to a loss of individuality, typically under a powerful central authority. However, for Anthony Burgess, author of the dystopian satire *A Clockwork Orange*, dystopian fiction is also 'an allegory of the present'⁴⁷. Atwood herself considers *The Handmaid's Tale* a work of speculative, not science fiction, 'employ(ing) the means already to hand' rather than 'things ... that we can't yet do'⁴⁸. Whilst dystopian fiction is classified as a sub-genre of both speculative and science fiction, Atwood argues '(she) did not put any events into the book that had not already happened'. Thus, given the dystopian genre's reliance on imagined and dehumanised societies, can a novel in which 'the amount of pure invention is close to nil' truly be considered amongst its ranks⁴⁹?

One aspect central to the dystopian genre is setting, which usually includes some form of environmental destruction. For example, carnivorous plants and forests reclaim desolate city streets in John Wyndham's 1962 *The Day of the Triffids*⁵⁰. *The Handmaid's Tale* does satisfy this element of dystopia, unfolding in the fictional Republic of Gilead, an environment in which

46 G. Orwell, *1984* (London, 2021).

47 'Dystopias: The Wanting Seed and the Politics of Fertility' *The International Anthony Burgess Foundation* (2025).

48 M. Atwood, 'Aliens Have Taken the Place of Angels: Margaret Atwood on Why We Need Science Fiction' *The Guardian* (17/6/2005).

49 M. Atwood, 'Margaret Atwood on What "The Handmaid's Tale" Means in the Age of Trump' *The New York Times* (10/3/2017); & M. Atwood, "'Oryx and Crake" Revisited' *Abramowitz Memorial Lecture* (MIT, 2004).

50 J. Wyndham, *The Day of the Triffids* (London, 1954).

‘the water swarmed with toxic molecules’, the air full of ‘chemicals, rays, radiation’. Offred’s speculation that ‘your very flesh may be polluted’ stresses her dystopian surroundings, a metaphorical link to the contaminating effects of arbitrary governmental control⁵¹. However, although Gilead seems a resolutely dystopian fictional setting, any such appearance is itself undermined by ever-present similarities to the contemporary existent world. The ‘Colonies’ to which ‘Unpeople’ are banished to labour on cotton picking, fruit harvesting or cleaning up toxic waste serve as an uncomfortable reminder of the brutalities of slavery throughout history. This hidden labour facilitates the everyday lives of the wealthier classes, and results in the death of the labourer: ‘they figure you’ve got three years maximum’⁵². Moreover, in Gilead nuclear accidents, including ‘exploding atomic power plants, along the San Andreas fault’, contribute to environmental degradation⁵³. These can be compared to the nuclear explosions and chemical leaks in Pennsylvania and Bhopal in the 1980s which led to infertility and extreme health issues⁵⁴. The confused weather patterns in *The Handmaid’s Tale* also disrupt crop cycles, causing food insecurity: a clear parallel, for instance, to the 57 million people who faced hunger from extreme weather events in 2022⁵⁵. Whilst Gilead’s ‘Commander’ is adamant that only organic produce should be used, pesticides such as chlorpyrifos are allowed to have a damaging impact on children. This too reflects a global reality, with the use of pesticides in agriculture doubling from 1990 to 3.7 million tonnes in 2022⁵⁶. Such environmental degradation is a major theme of the novel, responsible as it is for the high levels of infertility which lead to Handmaids being assigned to the ruling elite as forced providers of children. In the novel, such negligence towards the environment reflects the crux of misogynistic oppression, and clearly the deteriorating state of Gilead’s environment is not so dissimilar to that of the modern world. For Milan Sehmbi ‘Atwood’s novel applies itself to 21st-century America as America fails ... to control climate change and reverse the irreparable damages made’⁵⁷.

Another key element to dystopian fiction is governmental control. Arguably the most salient example is Orwell’s *1984*, in which ‘the Party’, led by the omnipotent ‘Big Brother’, exercises complete totalitarian control through violence, propaganda and surveillance⁵⁸. For Atwood ‘Orwell became a direct model’, and various similarities can be drawn between *1984* and *The Handmaid’s Tale*, such as restrictions imposed on language and the ostracisation of ‘Unpeople’ and ‘Unwomen’. Here there are also potential allusions to the Nazi use of *Untermenschen* as a description of ethnic groups considered inferior⁵⁹. Such control is fundamental to the dystopian genre, because ‘if (a) government has the ability to control people’s realities, then they can control people’s thoughts and actions’⁶⁰. However, again Atwood’s novel does not include anything fictionally dystopian. As she herself insists, ‘I didn’t want anybody saying ... “you made up all these bad things”’⁶¹. The ordinary citizens of Gilead are certainly forbidden from reading and writing, and ‘women from all classes

51 M. Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* (London, 2017), p. 122.

52 M. Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, p. 260.

53 M. Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, p. 122.

54 ‘Bhopal Disaster’ *Encyclopedia Britannica* (21/10/2024).

55 ‘COP28: Number of Children Facing Hunger due to Weather Extremes More Than Doubles’ *Save the Children* (28/11/2023).

56 ‘Pesticides Use and Trade, 1990-2022’ *Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations* (16/7/2024).

57 M. Sehmbi, ‘An Environmental Catastrophe: The Handmaid’s Tale’ *Medium* (5/3/2023).

58 G. Orwell, *1984*.

59 M. Atwood, ‘My Hero: George Orwell’ *The Guardian* (18/1/2013).

60 N. Neogi, ‘Government Representation in Dystopian Literature’ *Northeastern University* (22/11/2017).

61 M. Atwood, ‘Margaret Atwood Teaches Creative Writing: Official Trailer Masterclass’ *YouTube* (11/7/2018).

of society are excluded from any kind of written discourse'⁶². Moreover, 'the Bible is kept locked up. It is an incendiary device', and restrictions on both language and religion are intended to fortify control⁶³. However, censorship of literature was used by the Nazis, it is not a dystopian fabrication. The language restrictions in *The Handmaid's Tale* also extend to the use of patronymics, for example 'Of-Fred'. The Handmaids are assigned names formed of the possessive preposition 'of' combined with the first name of the Commander to whom they are allocated. With each change in Commander comes a new name, removing any form of individuality. Loss of singularity is also depicted through the semiotics of dress, with specific clothing imposed on different castes and classes. Women wear 'high heeled shoes with their straps attached to their feet like delicate instruments of torture'⁶⁴. The coloured uniforms and identification tattoos imposed on the Handmaids are also reminiscent of Nazi modes of control in concentration camps⁶⁵. The importance of expression and independence through clothing is again conveyed through Offred's recollections of 'laundromats. What I used to wear to them ... What I put into them ... I think about having such control'⁶⁶.

It is not just the women of Gilead who are stripped of individuality, as men too are simplified into three generic classes: 'Commanders', 'Doctors' and 'Eyes'. Each class has a different level of responsibility in the maintenance of order in Gilead. The Eyes are the secretive law enforcers, using violence and surveillance to ensure nobody steps out of line. Inspiring mistrust, their hidden identity causes Offred constantly to question and mistrust others: 'perhaps it was a test, to see what I would do. Perhaps he is an Eye'⁶⁷. This again has connotations of Orwell's slogan 'Big Brother is watching you' in 1984⁶⁸. However, the use of surveillance is not a dystopian fictional fabrication. Michel Foucault referred in *Discipline and Punish* to the 'Panopticon theory', suggesting people could be controlled if they believed they were under constant surveillance: a theory perhaps now made a global reality through the standardised use of CCTV and 'security devices', including facial recognition technology⁶⁹. To undermine such despotic governmental supervision, the 'Underground Femaleroad' in *The Handmaid's Tale* acts as a network of liberation and non-compliance, sheltering and smuggling out targets of the Gileadean regime. Yet, its very name is also a reference to the US Underground Railroad of the early to mid-19th century, which transported escaping slaves between safe houses in defiance of the Fugitive Slave Acts⁷⁰.

Most notably, arbitrary control is enforced in *The Handmaid's Tale* through sexual oppression. For the Handmaids this is 'systematic, institutionalized rape. Its function is for reproduction, never pleasure'⁷¹. However, this is far from a modern dystopian invention, and has biblical roots. In Genesis 30, Rachel, the wife of Jacob (a founding Patriarch of Israel), was unable to bear children. Therefore, Rachel told Jacob 'behold my Handmaid Bilhah. Go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her'⁷². This is a biblical precursor to the 'Ceremony', in which a Handmaid is raped by a Commander whilst his wife

62 M. Klarer, 'Orality and Literacy as Gender-Supporting Structures in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*' *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 28, 4 (1995), pp. 129-42.

63 M. Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 98.

64 M. Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 38.

65 'Tattoos and Numbers: The System of Identifying Prisoners at Auschwitz' *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum* (9/12/2019).

66 M. Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 34.

67 M. Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 28.

68 G. Orwell, 1984.

69 M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London, 1995).

70 'Underground Railroad' *Encyclopedia Britannica* (25/10/2024).

71 M. Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*.

72 Genesis 30: 3-4 *King James Bible Online*.

'holds (the Handmaid's) hands, each of mine in each of hers. This is supposed to signify that we are one flesh, one being'⁷³. Handmaids 'are two legged wombs'⁷⁴. Such legislative autocratic control of procreation is again not a dystopian invention. The Romanian dictator Nicolas Ceausescu's 1967 Decree 770 was designed to generate an increase in the Romanian population⁷⁵. It restricted abortion and contraception for all women until they had four children (except for those over the age of 45, those with medical complications and anyone pregnant by rape or incest). Atwood used newspaper clippings of this law as '*Handmaid's Tale* background material'. Atwood also referenced newspaper clippings of the Canadian Conservative MP Dave Nickerson's attempts to counter Canada's declining fertility rate with the slogan 'Make a baby for Christmas'⁷⁶. Equally, the 1935 Nazi *Lebensborn* programme was constructed to augment the 'racially valuable' Aryan population of Germany. This not only advocated institutionalised rape by Aryan men, but also the euthanasia of disabled children and adults⁷⁷. In *The Handmaid's Tale* babies with disabilities are known as 'Unbabies', and 'put somewhere, quickly, away'⁷⁸. Similarly, under the *Lebensborn* programme hundreds of children from occupied areas who fitted the Aryan visual criteria were kidnapped, just as in Chile in the late 20th century under General Augusto Pinochet thousands of children were stolen from their mothers and sent abroad for adoption⁷⁹. Such links between *The Handmaid's Tale* and real sexual dystopian events mean it is often called a 'feminist dystopia'. However, Atwood believes the 'term is not strictly accurate'. Instead, she considers her novel presents a pyramidal dictatorship, with 'the powerful of both sexes at the apex ... then descending levels of power and status with men and women in each, all the way to the bottom'⁸⁰. Rather than a feminist dystopia in which all men experience more rights than all women, this pyramidal structure further demonstrates the ways in which Atwood rejects the constraints of typical dystopian fiction. For Baccolini 'genres are cultural constructions' and Atwood 'subvert(s) the traditional dystopia ... (creating) for her protagonist an alternative world to the one which is usually possible for women in negative utopias'⁸¹.

Dystopian fiction is also often typified by the use of violence as a means to control. First published in 1985, *The Handmaid's Tale* appeared just after the Argentinian 'Dirty War' of 1979-1982. Using torture and rape to maintain social order and eliminate political opposition, the 'Guerra Sucia' led to the death or disappearance of between 10,000 and 30,000 citizens⁸². Violence and torture are also frequent in Gilead, for instance disobedient women are hung on 'the Wall', 'like chickens strung up by the necks in a meat shop window'⁸³. This again reflects the brutal historic deterrent of putting bodies on public display to prevent crime. Known as gibbeting, in the UK this became law through the 1752 Murder Act, and was intended to add a 'further terror and peculiar mark of infamy' to punishment by death⁸⁴. Indeed, the 'Salvagings' (public executions) seen in *The Handmaid's Tale* are still legal today in Iran, Somalia, North Korea and Saudi Arabia. A poll in 2004 revealed two thirds of the US were in favour of televised executions⁸⁵. Moreover, on October 27, 2008 in Somalia, thirteen

73 M. Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 104.

74 M. Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 146.

75 W. Steavenson, 'Ceausescu's Children' *The Guardian* (10/12/2014).

76 M. Atwood, 'The Real-Life Events that Inspired The Handmaid's Tale and The Testaments' *Penguin* (8/9/2019).

77 J. Boyd, *A Village in the Third Reich* (London, 2022), pp. 196-8.

78 M. Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 123.

79 J. Chambers, 'Chile's Stolen Children' *BBC* (26/10/2019).

80 M. Atwood, 'Haunted by The Handmaid's Tale' *The Guardian* (10/1/2012).

81 S. R. Wilson, *Women's Utopian and Dystopian Fiction* (Newcastle Upon Tyne, 2013), p. 157.

82 'Dirty War' *Encyclopedia Britannica* (4/10/2024).

83 M. Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 289.

84 T. Hitchcock & R. Shoemaker, *London Lives* (Cambridge, 2015), p. 46.

85 *NBC News* (23/2/2004).

year old rape victim Aisha Ibrahim Duhulow was arrested on account of adultery, buried up to her neck, and stoned to death by around 50 militants before a crowd of 1,000 people⁸⁶. These sickening contemporary examples of violence and torture highlight just how non-fictional the ‘dystopia’ of *The Handmaid’s Tale* really is. In Saudi Arabia, most women are banned from voting, driving and interacting with men unsupervised. They cannot travel or study without the permission of a male guardian and have little to no financial independence. For the poet Majda Gama ‘what Offred, the Handmaid, lived as some cautionary tale felt very much like my lived reality. One woman’s dystopia is another woman’s reality’⁸⁷.

Absolute control over women is also today exercised through cult organisations; and, Atwood’s collection of newspaper clippings includes an article on the ‘People of Hope’ cult, which ‘subordinates its women’ and whose ‘treatment of women is very Islamic. It’s a form of brainwashing’. Additionally, whilst researching for *The Handmaid’s Tale* Atwood was ‘looking out for all the stuff about forced polygamy ... meaning your old-order Mormons’⁸⁸. Mormonism derives from the religious tradition of the Latter Day Saint Movement, founded by Joseph Smith in 1830. It tends to be extremely family-oriented with a focus on maintaining absolute moral cleanliness. Indeed, societal views on the female role in the household in *The Handmaid’s Tale* may have stemmed from Mormon ideals, such as the novel’s presentation of non-consensual polygamy involving a married Commander possessing multiple women⁸⁹. Furthermore, the Quiverfull cult in Nineties America ‘controlled women’s appearance, sexuality and reproductive freedoms - all in the name of God’. Women who were not ‘nurturing or demure’ were ‘a threat’ to be ‘treated as caricatures to laugh at’. For one woman born into this cult, who eventually managed to leave, ‘my friends and I laugh that in our world, the Handmaid’s dresses wouldn’t have cut it - the necklines dip more than the width of two fingers below the collarbone, which is clearly immodest’⁹⁰. The regulations of female behaviour and dress which appear so intensely exaggerated in *The Handmaid’s Tale* demonstrably occur to an even greater extent in the modern world. As Atwood reiterated when questioned: “‘How do you come up with this shit?’, as if (I) invented it, “as I’ve said about a million times, I didn’t make it up”⁹¹.

Furthermore, *The Handmaid’s Tale* is arguably increasing in pertinence by the day. The ‘world crafted in *The Handmaid’s Tale* bears striking resemblance to the functioning of the Taliban when they last held power from 1996 to 2001’⁹². Two decades after being removed from power by a US-led military alliance, the Taliban retook control in Afghanistan in 2021. With a predominantly Pashtun, Islamic fundamentalist ideology, they are again imposing increasing restrictions on the rights of Afghan people, predominantly women and girls. New laws ‘not only violate Afghanistan’s domestic laws but also broadly contravene all 30 articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights’⁹³. Although the Taliban did not emerge until the 1990s, many critics believe Atwood’s novel was a portentous heralding of their atrocities. Afghan women must wear burqas, full body covering from head to toe, under the prohibition of women showing their hair, ‘too exposed in all its darkness and sexuality’⁹⁴.

86 T. Marattta, ‘A Critique of Contemporary World: Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*’ *Universita Ca’Foscari Venezia* (2017).

87 C. White, ‘Dystopian fantasy? *The Handmaid’s Tale* Is Based Entirely on Real History’ *BBC* (2/6/2017).

88 M. Atwood, ‘The Real-Life Events that Inspired *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Testaments*’.

89 J. G. Melton, ‘Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints’ *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1/11/2024).

90 K. Graham, ‘*The Handmaid’s Tale* Isn’t Just fiction - It Was My Life’ *Glamour* (4/7/2019).

91 M. Atwood, ‘The Real-Life Events that Inspired *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Testaments*’.

92 J. Tripathi, ‘The Genesis of A Modern Dystopia’ *Imperium* (21/8/2021).

93 M. A. W. Sadat, ‘Interview’ *Rukhshana Media*.

94 M. Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, p. 38.

As of October 2024, restrictions on Afghan women's voices have been extended to the degree that 'it is prohibited for a grown woman to recite Koranic verses or perform recitations in front of another grown woman'⁹⁵. Through the enforcement of the Taliban order for all women to wear the Islamic face veil, women in Afghanistan are subject to a total restriction on communication - even beyond the Handmaids' negligible ability to disclose information, by learning 'to lip-read, our heads flat on the beds, turned sideways, watching each other's mouths'⁹⁶. Moreover, contemporary reflections of *The Handmaid's Tale* are visible in the West. Following the overturning of *Roe v Wade* (the constitutional right to abortion) on June 24, 2022, parallels have been drawn between the 21st-century USA and Gilead itself⁹⁷. Celebrated novelist Stephen King immediately shared a post on Twitter saying 'Welcome to *The Handmaid's Tale*'⁹⁸. As the US presidential election drew nearer, President Biden stated that Donald Trump's re-election would be 'straight out of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Nationwide abortion bans, attacks on same-sex marriage, and restrictions on contraception - this is the horrifying reality'⁹⁹. Furthermore, in November 2024, multiple women arrived to vote at polling stations wearing Handmaid costumes of red cloak and white bonnet, expressing their fear for a future of diminished female rights¹⁰⁰. *The Handmaid's Tale* has become a symbol of societal trepidation in a world of increasing uncertainty.

To conclude, *The Handmaid's Tale* has been recognised as an absolutely critical modern dystopia. With comparisons drawn with Orwell's *1984* and Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange*, Atwood's novel is heralded as one of the most prescient contemporary works of dystopian fiction. However, as Atwood herself has continually emphasised, nothing in the novel is invention. Notable features of *The Handmaid's Tale*, from environmental destruction, despotic governmental control and violence to sexual oppression, all pertain to genuine historical events or systems. The novel's setting, Gilead, contains clear similarities to various places of environmental disaster, including India and the US, whilst its totalitarian regimes take inspiration from historical examples, including the Nazi's *Lebensborn* programme and Ceausescu's Decree 770. It is also of increasing relevance to the lives of women today, many readers identifying with the novel, including victims of cults and women in countries facing similar oppression, such as Saudi Arabia. Given escalating anxiety over current dictatorial threats, for instance from the Taliban, and uncertainties over changes in government in the West, *The Handmaid's Tale* is experiencing a revival in popularity. However, given dystopian fiction's reliance upon fabrication, or, at the minimum, significant perversions of the truth, it is difficult to conclude that this novel can unequivocally be considered part of the genre.

95 A. Rai, 'Afghan Women "Banned from Hearing Each Other" in Bizarre New Taliban Rule' *Independent* (30/10/2024).

96 M. Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 14.

97 R. Levinson-King, 'Four Ways the End of *Roe v Wade* Has Changed America' *BBC* (24/6/2023).

98 S. King, 'Welcome to *The Handmaid's Tale*' *Twitter* (25/6/2022).

99 A. Gangitano, 'Biden Campaign Blasts Potential Second Trump Term' *The Hill* (20/2/2024).

100 K. Sheehy, 'Weeping NJ Mom Dons Eerie Handmaid's Tale Costume To Vote' *New York Post* (5/11/2024).

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Humanity just can't help itself.



Maria Njoya

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Humanity exists in a reeling cycle of boom and bust: economically, socially and martially. It seems we cannot sustain a good quality of life for too long, either personally or as a society, before the fragile ecosystems we manufacture for ourselves begin to deteriorate. Sometimes this occurs slowly, and sometimes incredibly quickly, through war, the polarisation of political views or economic hardship and ensuing scarcity. Such a dissolution can be seen in the build-up to the First World War. Whether the fault lay with a lone young Bosnian Serb with a gun, or a larger, more complex scapegoat, the rise in tension and eventual weeks-long catalytic plunge into the war to end all wars came at a time of great technological advance, as well as significant social, economic and geopolitical change. Yet, as Christopher Clark wrote of the Great Powers at this critical moment, they were *The Sleepwalkers*, aptly reflecting the manner in which we tend to blunder into our greatest follies and tragedies¹⁰¹.

As a society we are, like Oedipus, incredibly powerful, knocking out a 'brilliant triumph' every breakfast, basking in our 'power, wealth and empire, skill outstripping skill'¹⁰². We are beloved of ourselves, and not unjustly. However, perhaps the old axiom is truer than we consider, that 'pride goeth before destruction'¹⁰³. The debate remains as to whether humanity's tendency towards self-destruction is congenital, a fault in the human condition, or something which one day we will manage to overcome, in some vague, enlightened future age.

As Lynton Caldwell argues, our 'great material success', and our over-enjoyment of it, remain the harbingers of our repeated dooms¹⁰⁴. In simple logic, one cannot fall from ground level. The pursuit of wealth is regularly acknowledged to precipitate some evil. After all 'it is easier for a camel to enter a needle's eye, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God'¹⁰⁵. As our civilisations have expanded and advanced themselves, it could be said that we have 'abandoned reciprocity with the natural world in pursuit of command over it', through money or status. We have plundered the earth of her resources, and in so doing, 'broken an ancient covenant with nature' not only intrinsic to Christian doctrine, but nearly all cultures¹⁰⁶.

We cannot, however, seem to bring ourselves to stop expanding, to stop developing. Our "fatal flaw", that showy dark crack running down the middle' of society, means that, when presented with even the inkling of a possibility of achieving beyond and above the status quo, we will seize upon it¹⁰⁷. As Plato considered in his *Allegory of the Cave*, we will always choose the light and, as such, the most advanced civilisation with the greatest scope for improvement. Man 'coming suddenly out of the sun to be replaced in his old situation (would) be certain to have his eyes full of darkness' and would do all he could to get back out of the cave¹⁰⁸. If our endless ambition is indeed the manifestation of the 'congenital character' of our sin, then it follows that we will never escape from this vital facet of human nature, it being just

101 C. M. Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (London, 2013).

102 Sophocles, *Oedipus the King* in *The Three Theban Plays* tr. R. Fables (London, 1984), lines 570 & 432-433.

103 Proverbs 16:18 *King James Bible Online*.

104 L. K. Caldwell, *Perspectives of the Self-Destructive Tendencies of Humanity: A Symposium Response* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 269-283.

105 Luke 18:25 *King James Bible Online*.

106 L. K. Caldwell, *Perspectives of the Self-Destructive Tendencies of Humanity: A Symposium Response*, pp. 269-283.

107 D. Tartt, *The Secret History* (New York, 1992).

108 Plato, *The Allegory of the Cave* tr. B. Jowett (Oxford, 1888), p. 5.

that: nature, and accordingly inexorable¹⁰⁹. Even the most well-meaning communist has never quite managed to make selflessness work without the threat of force, because the natural inclinations of humans do not align with such stringent self-denial.

It is also possible that we simply have not managed to invent the solution to our destructive ways, and that it is entirely possible to circumvent our flaws. If our reliance on emotion rather than reason is the primary culprit, for instance, we might find a way forward in our most sinisterly ingenious invention: the computer, and, its more recent adjunct, artificial intelligence. Caldwell posits that ‘human ingenuity has been outrunning ... the human mind’, and that we might be able to catch up with ourselves if only we could learn ‘the processes of systems dynamics simulated by the computer’¹¹⁰. As Donald Michael puts it more simply, ‘we need more information to understand the information we have’, and if we could create a computer which had the ‘autonomous creative intelligence’ of a human mind, and the infallible logic of a digital one, we’d be set¹¹¹. The practical issue is that we haven’t quite managed it yet; the philosophical issue is that we value human error, or else we would all have gone quite mad. The most beautiful people are not the perfectly symmetrical emblems of the golden ratio; the most devastating artworks are not the hyperrealist fever-dream catastrophes of AI-generated images. We as a species like to be able to see the brushstrokes, and so we remain willing slaves to the foibles of aesthetics.

In fact, some of the most celebrated human achievements were conceived at times of turbulence or suffering. Some of the most impactful advances have been made either in wartime or in competition with other nations: most egregiously the atom bomb; most poignantly the war poetry of, amongst others, Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen. The bitterness to ‘Dulce et decorum est’ has a particular bite, which only comes from real emotion, and this arguably, and depressingly, can only come from real suffering¹¹². It is a dull debate, as to whether an artist must suffer for his art, and one mostly argued by bad artists, but the fact remains that some of our best moments as a species have owed their inspiration to hardship, or even the quotidian imperfection of experience Buddhists call *dukkha*¹¹³.

We must consider whether we need the crash, to satisfy the anxiety of the preceding triumph, because we are afraid. The true success of triumphing over adversity, cannot exist without the adversity. In a reality where the ‘man-nature dichotomy, the conquest-of-nature ideology, material expansion, and perpetual growth have been the dominant themes of modernity’, our capacity for progress and our addiction to it are too great, and we will eventually eliminate the trials which have given us our most precious artefacts and treasured verses¹¹⁴.

One has only to dip a toe into the uncanny realm of Gothic art, to see the evidence of our fascination with the grotesque. The genre allows us to explore our attraction to things which may hurt us, especially when they make up for it with beauty, as Dorian Gray can attest¹¹⁵. And although not of the Gothic persuasion, *Play It as It Lays* by Joan Didion also wanders through the fakeness of slightly-polite society, the detrimental effects of living ‘affluent, disorientated lives’ and the ways in which we put ourselves through life as in a game, to see how much we can squeeze out of it¹¹⁶. Didion’s novel is obsessed with the ugliness of being ‘anaesthetized against pain and pleasure’, and is upsetting, but good art.

109 J. Cohen, ‘Original Sin as the Evil Inclination. A Polemicist’s Appreciation of Human Nature’ *The Harvard Theological Review* (1980), pp. 495-520.

110 L. K. Caldwell, *Perspectives of the Self-Destructive Tendencies of Humanity: A Symposium Response*, pp. 269-283.

111 D. N. Michael, ‘Is Humanity Destined To Self-Destruct? Our Predicament: We Can’t Know Enough To Know’ *Politics and the Life Sciences* vol. 18, 2 (September, 1999), pp. 247-250.

112 W. Owen, ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’ in S. Sassoon (ed.) *Poems* (New York, 1921).

113 ‘Dukkha’ *Encyclopedia Britannica* (4/10/2024).

114 L. K. Caldwell, *Perspectives of the Self-Destructive Tendencies of Humanity: A Symposium Response*, pp. 269-283.

115 O. Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (London, 1891).

116 J. Didion, *Play It as It Lays* (New York, 1970).

Indeed, Sylvia Plath wrote a whole poem about cutting her thumb cooking - 'what a thrill, (her) thumb instead of an onion' - and this unpleasant moment has been immortalised in what is now widely considered her best collection, *Ariel*¹¹⁷. As before, it is the imperfect moment, the imperfect woman, the confessional poem which interests people decades later; nobody knows what a robot would have made of the incident, but it would not have been a poem. Whatever degree to which we allow ourselves to appreciate it, humanity is intrigued by the horrifying. It is possible that a part of our self-sabotaging habit is a subconscious effort to spur ourselves on to achieve great things.

On the other hand, maybe the reason why such brilliance can be engendered in the greatest suffering is merely a byproduct of that suffering, and not so much its purpose. Humanity might deserve more credit for making the best of a bad situation, for the 'poignancy of our efforts' to undermine the cyclical hurt from which we cannot spare ourselves nor our children.

But if we are its cause, should we not pay the price? Did not Oedipus deserve his fate, because it was his own hubris that lead him to become both blind and painfully seeing? Our capacity for arrogance is perhaps the most critical factor in our downfalls. The 'story of ... the Tower of Babel (is) viewed as (a supreme example) of hubris': a warning that it was because we were audacious enough to try to reach God that we were splintered into different tongues and cursed to lack cohesion, a lack of cohesion which has become one of the worst tripwires in our blind search for unity¹¹⁸.

Michael holds that this is one of the main reasons for our consistent failure to thrive: that 'there is no shared set of value priorities', since we only share interests 'at a survival level' much more basic than the many-tiered labyrinth of our societies. We have created a system of communication and expression less complex than the reality of our situation. Moreover, 'our language compounds complexities because it unavoidably distorts a world of simultaneous multiple processes'¹¹⁹. Indeed, the multitudes of idioms and constructs not shared by any language show us the evidence for the inadequacy of our language systems. No language is equipped singlehandedly to convey the manifold convolutions of the human condition; no language translates exactly to another, and each must be understood in its own context, not merely in relation to another. The only way to achieve perfect expression of ourselves would be to speak every language all at once, which is sadly not possible. We must only try to use artistic means to express the inexpressible. Although language changes over time, it will never become absolute, nor will our understanding of what we are trying to convey, keeping philosophers relevant.

We have always been aware of this. From the first religious spark of Eve's punishment, that her descendants would be 'doomed to subjugation', we were given to understand the human tendency for sin was something which would linger¹²⁰. Arguably, however, we in the Christian West are alone in insisting upon the retention of such a damning inheritance, from generation to generation. According to Jeremy Cohen, one Christian priest with a vendetta against Jewish people tried to convince them of original sin by using a Jewish concept which translates as 'evil inclination', without recognising that 'evil inclination (would be) ... understood by any Jew as describing ... a beneficent drive in man, one producing ... hardly the dire effects of original sin'¹²¹. Christian ideology may try to advance the narrative of original sin, and map it onto other cultures which it will not fit, suggesting that it is not as universal a truth as we have given ourselves to understand.

117 S. Plath, *Ariel* (London, 1965), p. 15.

118 A. J. Tomasino, 'History Repeats Itself: The "Fall" and Noah's Drunkenness' *Vetus Testamentum* vol. 42 (1992), pp. 128-130.

119 D. N. Michael, 'Is Humanity Destined To Self-Destruct? Our Predicament: We Can't Know Enough To Know', pp. 247-250.

120 A. J. Tomasino, 'History Repeats Itself: The "Fall" and Noah's Drunkenness', pp. 128-130.

121 J. Cohen, 'Original Sin as the Evil Inclination. A Polemicist's Appreciation of Human Nature', pp. 495-520.

We have been falling since before the Bronze Age went under. We have invented ways of being dysfunctional which no animal could fathom, if they could fathom at all. Suicide, 'anguishing over whether or not to end one's life', notably is a 'uniquely human act', long deliberated-over by brooding artists and philosophers of every sort. This need to unsettle ourselves calls into question the downfall of the Mediterranean Bronze Age, during which the first bright inklings of culture, literature and language were beginning to erupt, giving us Linear B, cuneiform script and the first literature, dated through Homer to just before the collapse in c. 1200BC. Perhaps this event, with the resumption of subsistence farming and abandonment of that most ancient ghost town Mycenae, was one which Plato did not consider when writing *The Republic*, because it was unfathomable that a society so advanced could allow itself to regress so drastically, having had a glimpse of the light. So too the exodus of the Romans from Britain appears equally unthinkable. It is unnatural, and abhorrent to most, to relinquish the possibility of bringing to fruition individual and collective ambitions in one's own lifetime, so one can only assume that, to the last inhabitants of the promptly embellished Heroic Age, the alternative was worse than the collapse at hand. This is a particularly heart wrenching example of humanity dropping the ball. However, the question it raises has loomed over us throughout history. With the recurrent toppling of societies when they have become a little too good, and the insertion of idle kings or power-drunk presidents to make sure things then grind to a suitable halt, is there really something so chilling about the possibility of utopia, or can humanity just not help itself?

2: The Heretical Runners-Up

‘What is truth?’

(Pontius Pilate)



Abstract Fish: Johann Schmaedecker (Gibbs')

‘Humankind cannot bear very much reality’.

(T.S. Eliot)

Throughout history, did fear of female empowerment drive the persecution of witches?



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The earliest records of witches appear in around 800BC. Their appearance in Europe culminated in brutal witch-hunts, which developed from around 2BC. There were then sporadic accusations of witchcraft made throughout the Middle Ages, which then escalated into the great witch-hunt of the early modern era, one of the most infamous instances of mass hysteria. Although some of the accused were men, in early modern England nearly 80 per cent were women; and, in the 20th century anti-social women were still being associated with witches. A fear of females with power, particularly those defying traditional gender roles, played a crucial role in these witch-hunts. Indeed, the persecution of female witches throughout history has been viewed as an attempt by men to control women's place in society, and the term witch has come to be viewed as misogynistic. However, it would be unjust simply to label all witches as those threatening male dominance, without considering the evidence for alternative explanations. For instance, medical conditions, such as Alesoun Pierson's hallucinations in the 16th century, could lead to labelling as a witch, as could the antisocial behaviour of older women, including that of Janet Horne, the last woman to be executed for witchcraft in Britain. Indeed, religion, especially in the 16th century, drove many to fear witches as an expression of the supernatural and the Devil, not female power.

The persecution of witchcraft is one of history's most infamous examples of gendered violence. Witches were frequently accused of being in contact with the Devil, but in fact witch-hunts often reveal a more profound anxiety concerning the threat posed to the established patriarchal order by female power. For instance, Anne Boleyn was one of the first women to be exposed to books with feminist ideals, which she discovered at the court of Margaret of Austria. Later, she was viewed critically, and perhaps with jealousy by some, for involving herself in royal affairs as queen. Rumours began to circulate that she poisoned Catherine of Aragon in 1536, leading to accusations of witchcraft. These then helped bring about her execution on May 19, 1536: an example of what could happen to those who disobeyed patriarchal norms in Tudor England. Indeed, such defiance of gender norms would make other women ideal targets for accusations of witchcraft. For example, in the early 17th century Joan Flower began working as a servant for the Manners family, and through her friendship with the earl and his wife began to improve her social status. Rumours of Flower's witchcraft soon began to circulate in her village, and she was put on trial, perhaps suggesting a fear of her social mobility. Indeed, even in the ancient world women had a set role in society. For instance, when Medea, Erichtho and Canidia began studying the dead to strive for a better understanding of healing, and 'reviving' corpses to comprehend what had happened in the Roman civil war, they were immediately suppressed as witches. They were accused of violating their place as mothers in society and of making potions to control men. This reflects the period's deeply engrained fear of female authority and knowledge, paralleling accusations of witchcraft in later centuries. Indeed, anyone heretical in society was considered suspicious. For example, in the 14th century Alice Kyteler was accused of witchcraft after marrying four husbands. One might argue she gained wealth and power from these marriages, leading to her persecution. However, this does not take into account how she was herself used by the men involved for sexual reasons. All these examples reflect women attempting, in strictly hierarchal societies, to have a greater standing in society. Unfortunately, because of their heretical ways, they were persecuted.

The discouragement of women from defying social expectations has become a metaphor for patriarchal hegemony. The term witch has now come to represent female resistance, and numerous feminist groups in the 1960s even named themselves W.I.T.C.H. as part of the women's liberation movement. For Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, in *Witches, Midwives and Nurses: A History of Women Healers*, witches were persecuted because their advanced medical knowledge threatened the male-dominated medical establishment. In his 1953 play *The Crucible* Arthur Miller too emphasised the importance of social hierarchy at the time of the Salem Witch trials in 1692. 'Respectful speech' was incredibly important, and any violation of the code was seen as an offence. For instance, during the trial of Elizabeth Hutchinson her speech was limited to avoid her 'influential words' 'bewitching anyone'. Through an historical lens, we can imagine such 'influential words' were heretical views, possibly concerning the rights of women. It is clear, women were being kept in silence, most probably for fear of them gaining influence. In particular, after the 1468 publication of *Malleus Maleficarum* on how to treat women 'poisoned by the devil', men began to fear female power. This spiralled into mania, leading many to humiliate non-conforming women and to break up close communities of women for fear of resistance. Even today, as Wendy Griffin has observed, witch groups are practising, celebrating the female body and women's freedom in society, whilst mourning ancestor witches who lost their lives to male control.

Yet, whilst a compelling case can be made for a fear of women's perceived power influencing the prosecution of witches, alternative factors perhaps played a more significant role. Indeed, whilst far more women were prosecuted than men, this does not directly correlate to a male fear of influential female figures. With Christianity's centrality to northern Europe, Genesis led many to believe women were more likely to be possessed by the Devil. 25 per cent of witches accused over time were also men, with *Malleus Maleficarum* indicating men could be possessed by a male demon found in their semen. As such medieval thoughts on sexual actions had a significant influence on the prosecution of witches. Many witches were also perhaps prosecuted due to antisocial behaviour. Community was central to northern European society, and significantly so in the early modern period. Many older people often exhibited greater antisocial traits, and 60 per cent of women accused of witchcraft in Scotland were over 40. Indeed, those with marginal status in communities were frequently persecuted, such as the unfortunate Ursula Kemp in 1582, who had fallen out with many members of her village. Her trial revealed the villagers' antagonism towards her, and this could have contributed to her later execution. Equally, the oppression of witchcraft could have derived from a lack of understanding of the human anatomy. After the Black Death killed 30 million people, diseases were seen as supernatural punishment, and fingers were pointed at those with conditions such as hysteria or epilepsy. Most blame then fell on women, with the uterus seen as the source of all evil, and spitefulness associated with menstruation believed to infect others.

Many of the accused were consistently described as having medical conditions. In fact, James I's *Daemonologie* (1597) illustrates the confusion between mental delusion and witchcraft in the Renaissance, as he went to extreme pains to highlight the difference. Indeed, Samuel Willard's recollection of Elizabeth Knapp, suspected of being a witch, describes her physical fits growing into demonic possession, which meant she 'sometimes (fell) onto the ground with it'. We would now associate these symptoms with epilepsy, but in the late 17th century the condition had not been diagnosed. Some alleged sorcerers were also scapegoats for wider ecclesiastical problems. For example, Alesoun Pierson was accused after giving the Archbishop of St Andrews herbal tea to cure him of an illness. Although there was no direct proof of spiteful intention, he died shortly after. Historians have argued that with rising tensions in the church in the 16th century, church leaders needed someone to blame to justify his death and suffering. Attention was drawn to the healer who failed in her nearly impossible job of restoring his health. Superstition also controlled many people's lives in the early modern era. For instance, a witch was suspected of 'causing (a) bull to kill (a) colonel'. It is

quite possible many believed witches genuinely had supernatural powers. However, whether it was a matter of a woman being in the wrong place, at the wrong time or paranormal activities is a separate argument. Anyone who possessed marks or ‘teats’ on the body could be accused of witchcraft, such as the daughter of ‘the last witch’, Janet Horne, who was said to have had hands in the shape of hooves. As documents in the National Archives reveal, numerous people regarded teats as a sign of ‘where the devil had sucked her’. Therefore, it was not being a woman that men feared in the prosecution of witches, but having disabilities, medical conditions and mental delusions. It could also be argued that witches were used to hide the blame from the real culprits and suffered to keep church leaders in power.

As such, there is clear evidence that fear of female empowerment was not the only factor driving many to accuse people of being witches. In fact, fear of God, disabilities (both physical and mental) and unknown conditions drove many accusations. With the importance of community in the medieval and early modern periods rumours spread quickly, turning even respected healers like Alesoun Pierson into outcasts. Nonetheless, this by no means discounts the argument that men were fearful of women and that they did manipulate others to believe these women were demons in disguise. As such, many women from Anne Boleyn to Mary Warren, threatened with beating in Salem by John Proctor, suffered under male oppression. Therefore, I believe witch-hunts in part reflected a deep societal fear, prominent in the early modern era, that women could upend society’s strict hierarchy and counter male authority. However, we can also look back at those persecuted as heretics, particularly in the late medieval and early modern periods, whether it be for their behaviour, religion or search for empowerment, and sympathise with them for the punishment they received in the most heinous of ways.

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Are phones destroying our lives?



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As we all know, the prevalence of technology in society is increasing every day. The first mobile phone call took place only 51 years ago¹²². Since then, phones have become an integral part of society, and by 2024 there were almost 18 billion phones worldwide. Even 15 years ago that number was a fraction of the size. However, by 2023 31 per cent of people admitted they could not control their phone usage. Even more worryingly, most parents were spending more time on their phone than with their children. This is concerning and becoming an increasing problem as we become more dependent on technology. But how badly are phones affecting our lives?

For Johann Hari 'we now use our phones so habitually that I don't think we consider doing a task and checking our phones at the same time as multitasking, any more than we think scratching (our) butt during a work call is multitasking. But it is'¹²³.

What is addiction?

Addiction is defined as a 'chronic, relapsing disorder characterised by compulsive drug seeking and use despite adverse consequences'. It is considered a brain disorder, because it involves functional changes to brain circuits involved in reward, stress and self-control. For example, alcohol increases the production of endorphins, which promote pleasure and calmness. However, once the brain adapts to the presence of elevated levels of endorphins, after the person stops using alcohol, the brain receives fewer endorphins, with a decrease in pleasure which can significantly affect mood. When we use our phones repeatedly a similar thing happens. Dopamine increases in our nucleus accumbens, an area of the brain's reward pathway, bringing us pleasure. Whilst we hear about dopamine as a chemical which makes us happy, it also controls motivation. A group of genetically engineered mice without dopamine would starve to death, even with food placed in front of them, as they would have no motivation to eat. Dopamine is essential for humans in the same way. However, when a person becomes dependent on their phone, it can become difficult to reach the necessary dopamine levels to feel any motivation or pleasure, unless extra dopamine is released through phone use. Dopamine is also not always released directly by phone use but through anticipation. So, every time a notification pops up, the dopamine pathways get larger and increase motivation and pleasure.

It has also been shown that more young children are addicted to technology than adults. Around 50 per cent of teenagers feel they are dependent on their phone, whereas only about 35 per cent of adults feel so. This could be due to technology being experienced at a younger age. Most adults would not have had a mobile phone until they were much older than children today. This could be causing greater rates of addiction, as sensitivity to dopamine is much greater in children than adults. This addiction to phones can cause major problems for social interaction. Rats, when placed in an exciting, stimulating environment, outside their cage, produce a large amount of dopamine compared to those stuck in a lab cage. However,

122 G. Clemens, *The Cellphone: The History and Technology of the Gadget that Changed the World* (Jefferson, 2014), p. 65.

123 J. Hari, *Stolen Focus* (London, 2022), p. 38.

when the same rats are given a dopamine stimulant before entering the same stimulating environment, there are no signs of the synaptic changes which occurred previously. Similarly, when we become addicted to our phones, the novel aspects of our daily lives become much less exciting, so decreasing our attention spans. Microsoft have stated that our attention spans now, through increased phone usage, have dropped to around 8 seconds. This is less than a goldfish.

The effects of addiction and increased phone usage.

The effects of this dependency on phones to provide dopamine can be dangerous. People can begin to ignore other aspects of their lives, from seeing friends to spending time with their family and being active. A low dopamine baseline also decreases a person's ability to have social interactions, causing isolation and loneliness. This is because increased rates of cortisol are released when you put down your phone, causing stress and anxiety. This negatively impacts mental health, and a study has shown adolescents with only one hour of screen time are 29 per cent more likely to have had at least one suicide-related outcome in the last 12 months, involving considered, planned or attempted suicide or extreme feelings of loneliness. Indeed, adolescents who spent five or more hours on a screen were 48 per cent more likely to have had at least one suicide-related outcome.

Research by the Children's Commissioner for England has also found that 79 per cent of children have encountered violent pornography before reaching the age of 18. This over-exposure to hyper-sexualised content online can cause children to develop a poor understanding of healthy relationships. In addition, over 50 per cent of children who have been exposed to such pornographic content do not reach out to someone for help, forcing them to struggle with the experience alone. This significantly affects relationships in later lives, encouraging increased callousness towards females and distorted perceptions of sexuality. With an increasing number of apps finding partners for you, this also creates a society in which relationships and love are viewed as commodities. Dating and finding love become more like shopping, as you swipe to find the product you want. This can lead to the objectification of both women and men.

There is also the problem of unrealistic standards set by social media. Girls and young women are shown to be disproportionately affected by this, with 65 per cent of girls feeling pressured to achieve an unrealistic standard of beauty. When this standard is not achieved, it can lead to low self-esteem. Recent studies have also shown increasing numbers of young boys feeling similar pressure. Online abuse has also increased as phones have become integrated into society. 81 per cent of girls between 7 and 21 have experienced threatening or upsetting behaviour online. Indeed, given the prevalence of phones, such abuse is incredibly difficult to avoid.

Benefits of phones in society.

Whilst it may seem as if phones are only damaging our society, this is not entirely true. Studies have shown that, whilst spending over two hours on a phone will decrease your mental wellbeing, one hour will actually increase it. Regulated phone use can be beneficial. There are also many areas in which phones improve our lives, most obviously in communication. Without phones our ability to communicate with other people would drastically decrease. After moving away from home, most young adults see their parents less than once a month, and this only decreases over time. Phones are essential to sustaining these family relationships. Also, without phones, any support needed from friends or family in challenging times would be much harder to find. In addition, they allow us to communicate in emergencies, whether by calling the police or an ambulance. We often take for granted our ability to reach out for urgent help but, without phones, if injured, in danger or trapped in a

fire, we would in all likelihood have little to no help. Equally, with direct phone connections to services such as the police and doctors, aid with mental health is much more readily available. With just one Teams or Zoom meeting it is possible to contact a therapist for support. Without such technology it might be impossible to find support in a short time frame. This allows for improved mental health, with research showing no difference between therapy face-to-face or online.

While phones in education might seem to harm learning, a study has found that 70 per cent of student respondents were more motivated to learn when completing courses on their smartphones. Mobile learning also enables students to use features which allow for healthy competition, so improving productivity. Indeed, the consequent productivity increase of 43 per cent allows users to complete courses 45 per cent faster. Mobile learners are also five times more likely to retain information after completing their courses. Even in the recent election in America, political parties and those reporting and voicing their opinions did so principally online, with an increasing rate of political advertising on social media, including Instagram and TikTok. This suggests our increasing reliance on phones is not necessarily a bad thing, but something to be aware of.

In conclusion, it would be easy to say that, with phones increasing rates of depression, low self-esteem and abuse, they are a plague to be destroyed. However, their benefits and the key role they play in our everyday lives mean they are neither a curse nor a blessing. They are a tool, one to be used with caution. However, their negative impacts should not be understated and there are many possible measures to avoid the problems we now face. For instance, restricting phone usage to set times per day has been shown to decrease addictive behaviour. In France companies are also now prohibited from emailing more than 50 people over the weekend. This may seem trivial, but a constant flow of emails, causing you to return to your phone, increases addiction. Reducing their number decreases neuro association between notifications received and the pleasure of dopamine release. Similarly, by reducing the number of notifications popping up on your phone you can allow yourself time to focus on the non-digital world without distraction. Through these measures, you can drastically reduce the time spent on your phone and the impact it has on your life in the real world. This will allow you to interact better with friends and loved ones, to focus more on things important to you, for example work or school, and to enjoy time off screen.

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Male hormonal birth control should replace women's.



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In 1916, a woman named Margaret Sanger founded the first birth control clinic in Brooklyn, New York. She was arrested and her clinic closed. Five years later that same incredible woman founded the American Birth Control League¹²⁴. The United States was at the forefront of bringing women reproductive rights. Now, the United States is also responsible for what could be the greatest decline in women's reproductive rights since the 1970s: an overturning of the revolutionary Roe v Wade ruling, which allowed girls and women the vital right to decide what happened to their bodies¹²⁵. To add further insult to injury, Donald Trump's Project 2025 threatens to restrict access to birth control, particularly for those women unable to finance healthcare, in what could be viewed as a complete withdrawal of reproductive rights¹²⁶. These new policies (or more accurately withdrawals of policies) have thrown issues of birth control and reproductive rights to the forefront of politics worldwide, as options are explored. However, although male hormonal birth control was first investigated in the 1950s, there has been no advance in available impermanent male birth control since the invention of the condom 400 years ago.



A woman protests outside the Margaret Sanger Health Center¹²⁷.

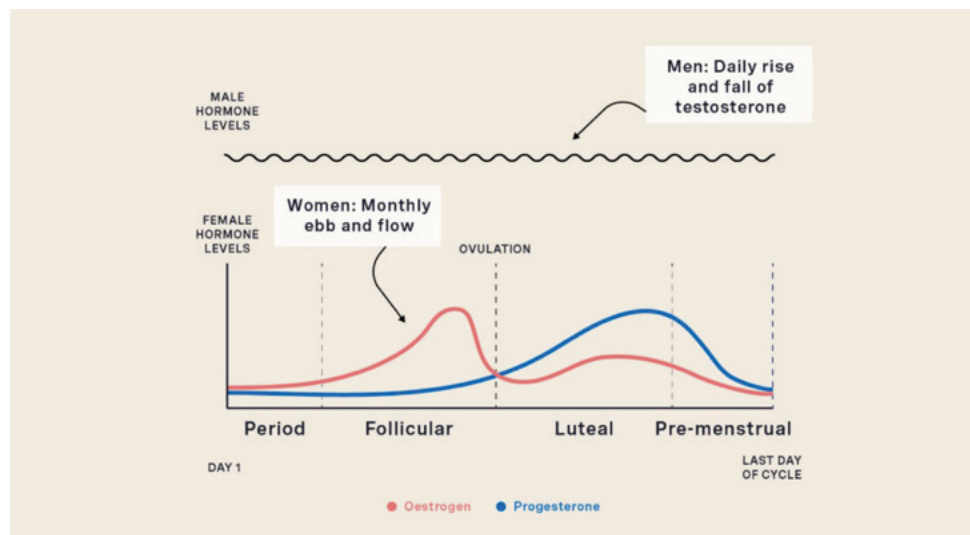
124 'Margaret Sanger (1879-1996)' *American Experience PBS* (13/3/2018).

125 'United States: Abortion Bans Put Millions of Women and Girls at Risk, UN Experts Say' *United Nations* (2/6/2023).

126 A. Hagopian, 'What Project 2025 Actually Says about Birth Control Is Alarming' *The Independent* (27/9/2024).

127 E. Lambert, 'New York City "Stand with Planned Parenthood" Rally Photos "Without Reproductive Freedom, There Is No Freedom"' *Teen Vogue* (15/2/2017).

Since 1916, birth control has in general been the responsibility of women. It is women who must visit the pharmacist, take a pill at the same time each day and suffer a range of symptoms, not to mention cover the cost. And yet it is men who have no biological time frame; they do not experience a menopause, and do not have a finite number of sperm (unlike women who are born with all the eggs they will ever have). Although the quality and quantity of a man's sperm may decline, he is able to father children until his death¹²⁸. Equally, men have 24 hour circadian hormone cycles, rather than the average 28 day cycle for a woman. This again makes men far more likely, or at least able, to father a child than a woman is to conceive. It is a biological fact that men are more able to have children. Why then should contraception be a woman's responsibility?



A graph showing the vast difference in hormones between males and females¹²⁹.

Yet, women have been the ones responsible for taking birth control for the last century, and not for good reason. Margaret Sanger founded the world's first birth control clinic after attending her mother's funeral. For Sanger it appeared that, after 18 pregnancies, including seven stillbirths and miscarriages, her mother's body had become so mutilated it gave up¹³⁰. Women manage birth control, or have historically, for fear of pregnancy; and, it is hard to believe that in 2024 women may still be genuinely fearful of motherhood. However, for women not granted the right to abortion, and financially, domestically or biologically unable to support a family, pregnancy is their worst nightmare. This is the position for countless women in Texas and the other 12 states currently under a total abortion ban. Women are not only living in terror but facing death¹³¹. This is not simply a matter of women not wanting children. For instance, Josseli Barnica was biologically unable to carry her baby, despite being desperate for her daughter to have a sibling. She died and her death could have been prevented had she been given correct care.

¹²⁸ 'Understanding the Biological Clock: Age & Fertility Explained' *Feminova* (2024).

¹²⁹ J. Druker, 'Why Are Most Fitness Plans Not Designed for Women?' *Jennis* (9/11/2024).

¹³⁰ 'Herstory - Margaret Sanger: Pioneer of Modern Birth Control' *LWV Napa County* (20/8/2022).

¹³¹ 'Interactive Map: US Abortion Policies and Access after Roe' *Guttmacher Institute* (9/11/2024).



Josseli Barnica who, whilst mourning her baby after a miscarriage, was denied critical medical care and died of sepsis¹³².

Women should not be in the position to have no option but to carry children, regardless of their ability. Our women should not be in a position of fear when it comes to family or the men surrounding them. A society that idealises the treatment of symptoms over sickness is bound for injustice. The introduction of hormonal male contraceptives may not repair the sexist and deeply unjust nature of our society. However, it would grant couples more choice, which at the end of the day is central to the politics surrounding reproductive freedom.

Additionally, the symptoms caused by methods of male birth control, both currently available and in development, are significantly less threatening than those for women. In fact, several effective male hormonal birth control pills have been discarded after testing due to 'undesirable side effects'. However, these undesirable side effects do not cause risk to life nor incredible pain, which cannot be said for female hormonal contraception. Symptoms most women are plagued with daily include mood swings, nausea, dizziness, weight gain, blood clots and even cancer. In fact, the A1 sheet listing these many symptoms is often laughed at, as it is so ridiculously unbelievable¹³³. This extensive list of symptoms is a huge risk to women's health, and not only those taking the pill. I remember a year ago, sitting in a doctor's office coughing up blood clots and being incredibly scared. I was told repeatedly that blood clots were a symptom of birth control (despite not being on the pill) and remained untreated. The pill is deemed a societal norm, as are its dangerous side effects. As such, hugely problematic underlying health conditions can be masked and women on the pill are less likely to get the care they require¹³⁴. Why should women be the ones to suffer the burden, especially when pills that have been deemed safe are still unavailable to men? Surely, it is self-explanatory to suggest that the simultaneous protection of women from cancer and potentially life-threatening pregnancies should be more highly valued than men feeling emasculated by a dry orgasm¹³⁵? There remain two safe birth control methods available to men: condoms (which aren't effective enough to be entirely relied upon) and vasectomies which are considered permanent.

132 C. Jaramillo & K. Surana, 'Josseli Barnica Died in Texas after Waiting 40 Hours for Miscarriage Care: A Woman Died after Being Told It Would Be a "Crime" to Intervene in Her Miscarriage at a Texas Hospital' *ProPublica* (9/11/2024).

133 A. M. Khan, '12 Side Effects of Birth Control Pills You Should Be Aware Of' *Emedihealth* (2023).

134 C. Lovering, '11 Things that May Make Birth Control Less Effective' *Healthline.com* (2021).

135 Z. Gorvett, 'The Weird Reasons There Still Isn't a Male Contraceptive Pill' *BBC* (16/2/2023).

It is not a purely biological issue either. In the United States women have to spend 68 per cent more for their out-of-pocket healthcare costs than men. In the United Kingdom women also spend £9.1 billion more than men on healthcare annually, and it is certainly not because they are more accident prone¹³⁶. Birth control is a woman's responsibility, as are the costs. Focusing once more on the United States, Project 2025 plans to remove government funding for contraceptives, significantly reducing a woman in poverty's chance of protecting herself. Reproductive rights are becoming increasingly expensive and unavailable to those less fortunate. This is not only an issue of feminism but classism and inequality. Those not in a financial position to support a child should be the last people denied reproductive rights. One study has found that since the 1960s the money women are spending on birth control has made up roughly one third of the total decrease in the gender pay gap¹³⁷. The pill is not only actively holding women back, but also the economy. Men have a greater disposable income to invest or save, and if women were not underpaid and overcharged further investment would be possible. In addition to contraceptives women must also pay for monthly menstrual products and the pink tax. This is especially problematic given financial illiteracy is plaguing women internationally, with 50 per cent of women in the US giving at least one 'do not know' answer concerning matters financial, in contrast to 34.3 per cent of men¹³⁸.

Responsibility should at least be shared. Admittedly, if both genders were on birth control it would create greater expenditure. However, if male hormonal contraceptives were available over the counter at the pharmacist, sales could even boost the economy. The pharmaceuticals industry is one of the UK's top five industries, and in 2021 the pharmaceutical turnover in the UK was £57 billion¹³⁹. The economic boost the production and sale of male birth control would create is certainly worth considering.

In conclusion, in debates concerning feminism and equality you must also remember the rights of men. The lack of impermanent birth control options restricts their choice and the choice of their partners. Women's birth control need not be banned, but if equality is what as a society we seek, men's birth control should absolutely be reconsidered. Women should not be forced to bear the burden and be at fault for pregnancy. Equally, young men deserve the right to choose, just as much as we do. Perhaps if they were granted a choice, they would value ours. In addition, female birth control is dangerous, expensive and overall bad for women, despite the pill being normalised and the pressure girls are put under to take it. A solution must be found.

136 'The High Costs of Birth Control' CAP (15/2/2012).

137 M. J. Bailey, B. Hershbein & A. R. Miller, 'The Opt-In Revolution? Contraception and the Gender Gap in Wages' *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* (July, 2012).

138 T. Bucher-Koenen et al., 'How Financially Literate Are Women? An Overview and New Insights' *The Journal of Consumer Affairs* (Summer, 2017).

139 'Pharmaceutical Industry in the United Kingdom (UK) - Statistics & Facts' *statista* (9/11/2024).

Geography doesn't matter anymore: how technology and the digital economy make location obsolete.



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It's a bold statement, but in a world of accelerating technological advances, old traditions and physical distances are daily becoming less significant. A developing digital economy has prompted a rethink concerning the economic importance of geography, especially given increasing internet speeds, improved software and hardware. Location used to influence the success of a country, as in 1922 when Great Britain governed the largest ever empire, covering over a quarter of the world and comprising 458 million people. However, the digital economy has minimised the constraints of geography and, with the increasing role of ecommerce, remote work and decentralised finance, location is starting to become obsolete.

The digital economy is an umbrella term for the global economic activity arising from billions of online connections between people, businesses, data and devices. It is rooted in digital computing technologies, as well as ecommerce and online platforms. According to the McKinsey Global Institute, approximately one quarter of the global economy is now digital, so heavily reliant on information and communication technologies¹⁴⁰. The effects are profound. People and businesses can now connect, transact and innovate ideas with others, usually in real time. In the past, geographical proximity to an economic centre, from London, to New York or Tokyo, would be essential for access to economic resources, employment opportunities or financial capital. This city-based model underlined the importance of location to economic success. However, the increase in online marketplaces and digital platforms, including Amazon, Alibaba and Shopify, has democratised economic opportunities. Now, a small business such as Montezuma, located in Iowa, can access international customers, whilst an entrepreneur in a developing country can work with companies in developed markets, accessing far greater opportunities.

Ecommerce has been transformative in making the geographical aspect to economies increasingly irrelevant. Online shopping and ecommerce platforms have created virtual marketplaces accessible to anyone with an internet connection 24 hours a day. Amazon, eBay and Alibaba, amongst others, have significantly reduced the entry barriers for sellers, who would previously have required a physical storefront in a prime location to secure customers. Shopify, for instance, enables individuals and small businesses anywhere in the world to create and own ecommerce stores, reaching global customers at a low cost. The global reach of ecommerce is also evidenced by its growth. In 2021 ecommerce sales worldwide amounted to nearly \$4.9 trillion, and by 2025 this figure is projected to increase by over 50 per cent¹⁴¹. The extent of this growth shows consumers are becoming increasingly comfortable with purchasing goods and services from distant sellers around the world. They are largely indifferent to location, unless they don't receive their purchase on time or in a satisfactory condition. Innovations in logistics and shipping have also facilitated this shift, making it possible for products to be shipped efficiently across continents. For example, the Amazon Fulfilment Centre has optimised inventory distribution, enabling quicker deliveries across wide distances¹⁴².

140 'Digital Globalization: The New Era of Global Flows' *McKinsey & Company* (24/2/2016).

141 'E-Commerce Sales Worldwide Set To Increase by 50 by 2025, Reaching 7.5 Trillion Dollars' *Asendia* (10/6/2022).

142 S. O'Neill, 'Sizing Down To Scale Up: How Amazon Reworked Its Fulfilment Network To Meet Customer Demand' *Amazon Science* (24/7/2024).

One of the most important global shifts, helping make geography less relevant, has been the development of remote working practices, accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic. According to a Gallup study, in 2022 approximately 58 per cent of American workers were working remotely at least part of the time: a sharp increase from pre-pandemic levels¹⁴³. Remote work has untethered employees from specific locations, allowing many to work where they choose, usually with minimal impact on productivity. As companies continue to adopt remote or hybrid models of working, workers increasingly have the option to live in areas more suited to their lifestyle or budget, rather than being forced to live in a metropolitan hub. This is particularly beneficial for rural and smaller urban areas. They can now attract remote workers, whose skills and income can trigger growth in the local economy, without the need for constructing physical office blocks.

One more transformation brought about by the digital economy since 2017 has been the appearance of decentralised finance, also challenging geographical limitations to the economy¹⁴⁴. Platforms like Ethereum enable person-to-person financial transactions, with just the need for an internet connection, even when the people involved are at two different points in the world. In traditional finance, location has historically determined access to capital, with larger financial hubs demanding more resources. However, with decentralised finance, a user in a remote village can access the same financial services as someone in a major city, so bypassing the need for physical proximity to banks or brokers. While decentralised finance is still in its infancy, it has a lot of potential to democratise finance and reduce dependency on traditional banking infrastructure. This could significantly reduce location-based inequalities in terms of financial access and currency complications.

Since the internet's creation it has rapidly become the world's most extensive library, offering anyone with internet access almost infinite learning resources. I have benefited from using platforms like Cognito and Seneca Learning, which provide online courses from top institutions, free to access. Websites like this have given a boost to a new kind of self-learning education, allowing students from around the world to study, eliminating the need to be physically at a place of education. Websites such as Quora provide information from expert sources, and are also open to everyone everywhere. Wikipedia, the world's largest online encyclopaedia, further shows how information once dependent on geographical access is now available worldwide. As an example, in the past you could find more information about the history of the British Empire in 1922 in the UK than in a museum in Liberia: a country in West Africa never colonised by any other country¹⁴⁵. This access to knowledge has helped bridge the gap between the developed and developing worlds, enabling individuals in less affluent areas to learn new skills and compete in the global economy. Many people, particularly in emerging economies, have leveraged these resources to create freelance or tech-based careers for themselves.

However, while the digital economy has substantially reduced the importance of geography, there are still some limitations imposed by location. Major limitations, for instance, include levels of access to electricity, digital resources and internet infrastructure, which remain barriers to low income developing countries. Nearly half of the world's population still lacks connection to the internet, so preventing individuals in certain areas from benefitting fully from the digital economy. Moreover, internet speed can reduce options, for example limiting productivity and increasing user frustration¹⁴⁶. In less developed countries people might also not have access to, or the funds for, devices with suitable software and hardware.

143 L. Saad & B. Wigert, 'Remote Work Persisting and Trending Permanent' *Gallup* (13/9/2021).

144 A. Ferreira, 'Decentralised Finance (DeFi): The Ultimate Regulatory Frontier?' *Capital Markets Law Journal* (July, 2024).

145 A. Boddy-Evans, 'Countries in Africa Considered Never Colonized' *ThoughtCo* (23/7/2024).

146 '4 Disadvantages of Bad Internet Connections for Business' *Itel Networks* (6/11/24).

Other significant limitations to the digital economy include cyber-attacks or hacking. These attacks can be catastrophic, even shutting down whole networks. For example, a teenager hacked into NASA and the US Department of Defence networks in 2000, so kickstarting developments in software security¹⁴⁷.

There are also still some location-based benefits in terms of human factors and interactions. In a physical meeting, for example, you can judge body language in a way not possible in a Zoom call. Networking can also only be properly achieved when in the same place face to face. If there is a glitch in the technology or someone's device breaks, IT experts on site can also resolve the situation right away, unlike if working remotely.

In conclusion, the digital economy has redefined the role of geography in economic activity, creating vast new opportunities for people and businesses, regardless of physical location. Ecommerce, remote work and decentralised finance have fostered a marketplace which is increasingly indifferent to geography. This enables individuals and businesses from rural and underrepresented areas of the world to participate in the global economy. Nevertheless, challenges remain, such as the digital divide and limitations in digital infrastructure, which remind us that geography is not entirely obsolete. While the digital economy has allowed for unprecedented levels of connectivity and mobility, it has not entirely removed geographical constraints. It has rather redefined them, allowing individuals and businesses to transcend some limitations, while still confronting others. As digital technology continues to evolve, the global economy may come closer to a truly 'borderless' system, but a balance between the digital and human systems remains essential.

147 J. Fox, '11 Biggest Cybersecurity Attacks in History' (20/6/2024).

Democratic capitalism has outstayed its welcome.



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According to Michael Novak, 'democratic capitalism is a political, economic and social system with a market economy based on democratic principles and the rule of law, allowing individuals the freedom to pursue their economic interests within a framework of political and legal responsibility'¹⁴⁸. However, one of the biggest issues for today's society is that this system allows individuals to bypass its 'framework' of responsibilities after they reach a certain point of success. Democratic capitalism, which has built great countries and legendary individuals, is becoming antiquated and backwards. How has this happened and what needs to change? Neither question has a straightforward answer.

Today, there are a multitude of problems with democratic capitalism. For instance, significant numbers of people, even in the wealthy West, are living without basic essentials, such as access to food and clean drinking water. In the United Kingdom current statistics suggest 7.2 million people, including 17 per cent of children, are living in food poverty. In the US running water and basic indoor plumbing are inaccessible to more than two million Americans¹⁴⁹. Notably, in Spain, the government also proved incapable of helping its people recover from the catastrophic flooding Valencia faced in October 2024, and the King of Spain had mud thrown at him when he finally visited the area more than a week after the events. The response was outrageously slow. The army took four days to get involved, and this inaction resulted in more than 200 people being killed¹⁵⁰. In response to claims that the Valencian government didn't engage the army quickly enough, the regional leader, Carlos Mazon stated it was the army's responsibility to make such decisions. Predictably, Javier Marcos of the Military Emergency Unit then countered that protocol dictated 'the regional government had to request any such support'. Such bickering seems almost childish and was certainly counterproductive. Mistakes were undoubtedly made and, critically, no one was willing to take responsibility. This is because everyone is inherently self-centred, career-hungry and ruthless. One has to be to make it in the harsh world in which we live.

Indeed, a leader's self-serving decisions can have tremendous consequences. In 2020, Boris Johnson, the British prime minister elected to suspend many basic human rights, by announcing a lockdown to prevent the spread of the new coronavirus¹⁵¹. Although it was hard, everyone knew it was for the best, and so the majority of Britain adhered to the rules, settling down for a spring of isolation. We endured separation from family and friends for months on end and, on Johnson's instructions, stayed at home. We did this for the good of the nation as a whole, with just a select few breaking the rules. Astonishingly, one group of people who did break the rules happened to be part of the government which had created and enforced them¹⁵². This itself points to a systemic flaw in the distribution of power within our society. Those who are in power believe they are exempt from the law; even if the UK might have

148 M. Novak, *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* (Seattle, 1991).

149 'Closing the Water Access Gap in the United States: A National Action Plan' *US Water Alliance* (11/11/2024).

150 G. Hedgecoe, 'Accusations Fly in Spain over Who Is To Blame for Flood Disaster' *BBC* (5/11/2024).

151 'Coronavirus: Strict New Curbs on Life in UK Announced by PM' *BBC* (24/3/2020).

152 'Partygate: A Timeline of the Lockdown Parties' *BBC* (21/3/2023).

a Committee of Privileges, determining which laws the government can and cannot break. Indeed, the fact that two rule-breaking parties were held in 10 Downing Street on the night before Prince Philip's funeral, which the Queen had to attend on her own, made the situation significantly worse. In the end, Johnson resigned, but only once the pressure of allegations that he had lied to parliament about breaking the rules made his situation untenable. This itself speaks volumes about the imbalance of power in our current system.

However, individuals are not the only problem. The UK government has itself become ineffective. Countless governments have failed to tackle the rising cost of living, pushing many people to the brink. The NHS is on the verge of collapse, as it faces crushing numbers of patients¹⁵³. Junior doctor strikes should have been enough to nudge the government into action, but despite their efforts, most junior doctors are still severely underpaid, with many working for close to the minimum wage per hour¹⁵⁴. The NHS is so strapped for funds because of a fundamental lack of investment in, and a critical mismanagement of, the world's largest and only tax-funded healthcare system. This is not just a reflection upon Kier Starmer and his Labour government, but also previous Conservative regimes. The list of NHS scandals is also far longer than one can possibly imagine, from deranged baby killers like Lucy Letby to mass blood infections. Sadly, the NHS is just the tip of the iceberg in our malfunctioning state. National Rail is a complete trainwreck, with Transpennine Express last year having one sixth of its services cancelled¹⁵⁵. For years, wage rises have failed to match inflation. With the UK's debt now approaching £2.8 trillion, it makes the chancellor, Rachel Reeves' search for a missing £40 billion almost laughable¹⁵⁶. Almost as laughable is the idea of losing £40 billion in the first place. The competitive nature of UK politics means parties are willing to sacrifice the country they serve to ensure power. In Labour's manifesto, Reeves promised not to tax the working person - for Keir Starmer 'someone who lacks the wherewithal to write a cheque' - whilst increasing funding¹⁵⁷. Perhaps she was naïve: she could hardly argue she was unaware of our fiscal peril, given government finances had been available for her to view as shadow chancellor. More likely, she and Labour were desperate to win power by any means necessary. After all, nothing can now be done to force an election in the next five years, and so her risks of overpromising were low. This makes power something of a certainty for the Labour Party, and by winning a landslide majority Labour made it a lot more difficult to challenge and scrutinise the government in the years to come.

For the general population, this is a huge problem. At the time of writing, Labour's first budget, the first to be delivered by a female chancellor of the exchequer, has failed to make good on the promises made in the manifesto. Most people view the increased rate of national insurance on business, reducing the threshold by more than 45 per cent, as an indirect tax on working people, going directly against one of Labour's key promises. Furthermore, the increase in national minimum wage requirements for those over 21, as well as 18 to 20 year olds, will inevitably result in a higher cost of living. Many shops and bars cannot afford to maintain their current prices whilst continuing to pay staff, leaving them with the nearly impossible choice of firing staff, or raising prices and losing income¹⁵⁸. I must be the only person who thought that making life easier for small businesses and working people wouldn't involve pushing millions to the brink of insolvency.

153 S. Danechi, R. Harker & S. Stiebahl, 'NHS Key Statistics: England' *House of Commons Library* (30/5/2025).

154 J. Reed, 'How Much Do Junior Doctors Really Get Paid in England?' *BBC* (11/8/2023).

155 K. Austin, 'TransPennine Express Worst for Train Cancellations' *BBC* (23/4/2023).

156 'A Brief Guide to the Public Finances' *Office for Budget Responsibility* (2024).

157 'Kickstart Economic Growth' *Labour* (2024); & P. Seddon, 'Starmer Attempts To Define "Working People" Tax Pledge' *BBC* (25/10/2024).

158 P. Seddon, 'Budget 2024: Key Points at a Glance' *BBC* (30/10/2024).

Wednesday, November 6 was victory day for Donald Trump: someone who also claims to be a working man, and to have built himself up from scratch¹⁵⁹. He neglects to mention the fact that his dad was a well-off property developer and that he was given healthy financial backing from the start, courtesy of his father. He built a hugely impressive, although slightly sketchy, property empire; and, although the road wasn't always smooth for him, he glided through almost seamlessly. Even becoming a convicted felon, and only the second US president to be impeached, couldn't stop his ascent to a second term in the White House. Despite his charismatic ways, this underlines a key point: in our current system wealth brings power, and so to be born into wealth gives you a disproportionate advantage. The fact of the matter is that it is incredibly difficult to change one's class. One of the key factors in this is education, and in the UK the difference between regions is astonishing. Across the north of England, at GCSE less than 70 per cent of results achieved were a pass, in stark contrast to a much higher performance in the south¹⁶⁰. This also mirrors countrywide inequalities in gross disposable household income, a key metric for identifying wealth¹⁶¹. Fundamentally, these statistics prove how hard it can be to improve and break the vicious cycle of poverty. Education is the key to success in the workplace, with those from economically deprived areas with a university degree earning 38 per cent more than their non-graduate counterparts; and failure to address this will inevitably result in the economic divide becoming wider¹⁶². Yet, no action is taken. This represents a fundamental failure in the previous government's intention to level up Britain, a key theme for Boris Johnson post-COVID¹⁶³. Indeed, the new Labour government has also introduced VAT on public school fees. The consequence is that many people, working hard to enable their children to have a better education, have been forced to remove them from private schools. The effects are twofold. It has placed more pressure on the state system, which was already working at near-capacity, and it will inevitably widen the educational divide still further. More children will be forced to attend overcrowded state schools or be homeschooled, receiving a compromised education, so pushing the lower echelons of the middle class closer to the experience of the working class, subsequently splitting the middle class in two. The effects of this could be catastrophic for the current generation in schools, depriving many of the opportunity for self-advancement.

However, these problems seem negligible compared to those faced by many globally. There are more than 100 impoverished nations across the world: a result of European empires built in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. For example, in Africa the country with the highest GDP is South Africa, but its GDP remains just 11 per cent of the UK's; and the situation in South America is no better¹⁶⁴. In Asia, despite the GDP of several countries, including China, India, Korea, Singapore and Japan, rivalling those of the West, in some cases their standard of living remains that of second world countries. Despite India having a GDP higher than the United Kingdom and France, millions of people still lack access to clean drinking water or electricity. Despite the strength of its economy China also ranks amongst the bottom ten countries in the world for human rights¹⁶⁵. This shows how in our current system, even wealth doesn't guarantee a reasonable standard of living, underlining just how extreme the imbalance of wealth can be. China is home to 5.85 million millionaires, many of whom have made their

159 D. J. Trump & T. Schwarz *Trump: The Art of the Deal* (New York, 2020).

160 H. Shearing & J. Burns, 'GCSE Gap Between South and Rest of England Widens' *BBC* (21/8/2024).

161 'Regional Gross Disposable Household Income, UK: 1997 to 2021' *Office for National Statistics* (2024).

162 'New Analysis Shows Students Who Choose To Learn More, Earn More' *Universities UK* (4/3/2025).

163 J. Halliday, 'Levelling Up: What Is It and What Has Boris Johnson Proposed?' *The Guardian* (15/8/2021).

164 'GDP (Current US\$) *World Bank Group* (2024).

165 'Human Rights Index, 2024' *Our World in Data* (2024).

money through industry, manipulating the nation's abhorrent standard of human rights for capital benefit, employing factory workers for pennies¹⁶⁶. And now, large western companies such as Apple and Volkswagen are exploiting the seemingly never-ending supply of available cheap labour for the benefit of their customers - us¹⁶⁷! This inevitably raises the question as to how western manufacturers get away with it. The simple answer is that it doesn't affect us. On the contrary, it benefits us, as it's cheaper to manufacture an iPhone and ship it to the other side of the world than simply build it here. And so the rich and powerful continue to get away with it, because that's simply the way the world works. In India, the situation is no different. The Ganges is the most polluted river in the world, acting as the sewage system for a huge population corridor, cutting through the centre of the subcontinent¹⁶⁸. Yet, it also acts as the primary source of drinking water for millions of Indians. That this can be allowed to happen in a country with such a large economy and a population of over 1.45 billion speaks clearly of the intentions of its government and those in power. Although strides are being made to improve this, the government still prioritises other projects¹⁶⁹. Those in power will argue that India needs to improve other aspects of life, such as infrastructure, to gain funds for these improvements. However, this is fundamentally missing the point. These problems cannot wait, and by avoiding them, India's government is critically compromising the lives of millions of the citizens they are supposedly serving. Globally, we are seeing improvements in standards of living and human rights, but so much work has yet to be done. As such, governments should be implored to consider changing their focus: to favour humanity above all else for our sake and theirs.

So what other options are there? In the past 150 years, only one other form of society has worked: communism. However, every communist society has had a woeful human rights record, from Stalin's Soviet Union to Mao Zedong's China. Furthermore, with the exception of today's China, no communist economy has been able to come close to matching its capitalist equivalents. Famously, the Soviet Union found itself pushing so hard to keep up with the United States that by the 1990s it imploded, shattering into 15 newly independent countries. Fundamentally, communism didn't work, and nor will its milder sibling, socialism. Socialism has certainly proven its worth in Scandinavia, where successfully run welfare programmes and high standards of living coexist with strong free market economies. For example, Sweden ranks fifth in the world for healthcare, ninth for education and fifth in the world for income equality, whilst maintaining a GDP of more than \$600 billion¹⁷⁰. However, humans are naturally greedy and ruthless; and so changing our very nature, developed over millennia, is nearly impossible, and can only be limited to small case studies, such as the Nordic countries. To expect this to be replicated on a global scale is optimistic to say the least.

Nonetheless, hybrid systems are possible; and, but for the appalling rate of change which plagues modern government, perhaps those with a more socialist outlook might have been able to exercise their opinions a touch more. Indeed, participatory economics involves workers and consumers more in economic decision-making, and at first this might seem a good solution. However, the reality is that it would lead to huge inefficiencies. People are also not always sufficiently intellectual, or interested, to make well-informed decisions. Hence, in

166 C. Textor, 'Number of Millionaires in Mainland China from 2015 to 2024' *statista* (7/4/2025).

167 C. Textor, 'Largest Foreign Companies in China in 2022, Based on Domestic Sales and Employees' *statista* (11/7/2025).

168 '12 Most Polluted Rivers in the World' *Sea Smart* (17/2/2022).

169 'In India's Water-Stressed Villages, Modi Seeks a Tap for Every Home' *New York Times* (21/12/2021).

170 'Best Healthcare in the World' *World Population Review* (2024); 'Education Rankings by Country' *World Population Review* (2024); L. Ventura, 'World Inequality Ranking by Country 2022' *Global Finance* (17/2/2022) & 'Sweden' *International Monetary Fund* (2024).

our current system, we elect well-educated and informed individuals to represent us, with the capacity to make better decisions. A potentially more practical solution might be to introduce a universal basic income, a form of minimum wage. However, this could trigger crippling inflation, high costs and remove the motive for working harder to win a better life. A more futuristic idea might also be a technocracy. The removal of emotion from decision-making, resulting in purely data-based choices, could be significantly more efficient and effective than our current system. However, despite recent advances, AI still has a long way to go before it can be trusted by the general population. Recent studies have also shown that despite improvements, 76 per cent of people wouldn't trust AI to write laws¹⁷¹. Moreover, such a technocracy reduces democratic control. This means that, for the time being, a technocracy is nothing more than fantasy. Sadly, none of these systems appears to be an upgrade on the status quo. However, undeterred, many of our generation's great thinkers will continue to ponder changes which could be brought about to make our world better.

Our world is a beautiful, if messy, union of difference, contrasting opinions, fortunes and opportunities. Democratic capitalism is undoubtedly outdated, and one must have faith that humanity can improve and advance, as we always have. However, there are limitations to what we are prepared or willing to do. The human brain is preconditioned with greed, a yearning for power and authority, and this will always be the key factor limiting change. The people who can force change don't want it, for they are the beneficiaries of our system. Moreover, we have no solution. There is no accepted change or compromise that can convert our fundamental way of being. In conclusion, the system is by no means perfect, but it's the best we have.

171 J. Koetsier, 'In AI We Do Not Trust: Survey' *Forbes* (5/6/2023).

Exposing the Empire's shadows: Arthur Conan Doyle's orientalism reflects the weaknesses within British society.



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The term 'orientalism', established by Edward Said, describes biased and commonly contemptuous portrayals of Asia seen through the distorting lens of western perspectives¹⁷². This concept is evident in the works of Arthur Conan Doyle, notably in his representation of the east in his Sherlock Holmes stories. Since Conan Doyle's first Holmes story in 1887 - published at the height of British colonialism - his tales have become cultural landmarks. Yet, they are also deeply embedded in imperial ideologies. The detective genre's reliance on creating clear roles for both criminals and victims led Conan Doyle to cast his antagonists as the 'other' with easily distinguishable characteristics. He frequently gave them oriental features to create a sense of exoticism and mystery. In fact, the Victorian detective story thrived on the notion of orientalism, reflecting the biases and prejudices of the time, and exposing the weaknesses within British society during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Conan Doyle's narratives reveal Britain's reliance on colonial and imperial ideologies to sustain a sense of national identity and power, but in doing so also expose the Empire's own fragilities and insecurities.

The rise of orientalism and the expansion of the British Empire as a colonial power were deeply intertwined. As Britain colonised parts of the orient, trade and cultural exchanges introduced floods of new goods, people and customs, exposing British society to unfamiliar eastern cultures. These interchanges, however, were filtered through a western gaze; and, for Said, 'Asia (spoke) through and by virtue of the European imagination'¹⁷³. Rather than integrating and appreciating these foreign influences, British society viewed them as part of a mysterious 'other', associating the east with hostility, exoticism and danger. This perception of western dominance over Asia reinforced a narrative of British superiority, positioning the east as culturally and morally 'inferior' and in need of western civilising guidance: a world not only geographically remote but also culturally distant. The portrayal of the east as mysterious and subordinate reinforced a sense of British identity as civilised and rational: a self-image vital to the Empire's ideology of dominance. The unfamiliarity of the east, as Said argues, also led to 'hostility expressed by the division, say, of men into "us" (Westerners) and "they" (Orientals)'¹⁷⁴. This disengagement from addressing the rights of the east as equal, allowed the British to justify colonisation as morally righteous and necessary. By evoking the exotic and unknown, Conan Doyle capitalised on this fear of the 'other' to create suspense and intrigue - crucial to the detective genre - whilst also subtly reflecting the anxieties underpinning Britain's imperialist self-image.

Conan Doyle's Dr Watson serves as a complex medium for critiquing British imperialism. Through interactions with 'exotic' cultures - often portrayed as mysterious and menacing - Conan Doyle also uses his characters more broadly to reflect both the anxieties and contradictions within contemporary British society. Although Watson was born in Britain, his ventures in the east and subsequent return home bring back elements of the 'other', leaving lasting impacts on both his physical and psychological state. As Siddiqi observes 'the return of disfigured and violent colonials points to a historical trauma that has been repressed'¹⁷⁵.

172 E. Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1978).

173 E. Said, *Orientalism*, p. 56.

174 E. Said, *Orientalism*, p. 45.

175 Y. Siddiqi, 'The Cesspool of Empire: Sherlock Holmes and the Return of the Repressed' *Victorian Literature and Culture* (2006), p. 3.

Watson embodies this trauma, returning to Britain with visible and invisible scars from his colonial experiences, symbolising the hidden consequences of imperial conquests both on British individuals and society. Interestingly, Watson's old war wound was originally described in *A Study in Scarlet* as a result of being 'struck on the shoulder by a Jezail bullet' in Afghanistan¹⁷⁶. Yet, he then 'nurses his wounded leg' as it 'ached wearily at every change in weather' in *The Sign of the Four*¹⁷⁷. This shifting pain can be interpreted as a metaphor for the way in which imperial trauma spreads through British society. This lingering injury won't heal, and instead resurfaces unpredictably, hinting at a deeper societal discomfort. Through Watson's character, Conan Doyle exposes unresolved tension in Britain: a society unable fully to accept that the costs of empire are far from confined to the colonised.

The Sign of the Four also reflects a pervasive Victorian apprehension of eastern culture, with Conan Doyle channelling popular beliefs concerning 'oriental' traits of criminality and animalistic behaviour. Characters from the east are depicted in ways which evoke fear and fascination. For instance, Conan Doyle's description of the antagonist Tonga vividly conveys this trope: 'His small eyes glowed and burned with a sombre light, and his thick lips were writhed back from his teeth, which grinned and chattered at us with half animal fury'¹⁷⁸. This portrayal reinforces stereotypes equating eastern identity with a wild, untamed sense of otherness and danger. For Said such dehumanisation sees 'the orient ... depicted as a sort of surrogate and underground self, (and) like some aspects of dreams, repressed and animalistic behaviours reveal themselves'¹⁷⁹. As such, Conan Doyle plays into Victorian fears of the east as morally inferior, mirroring a broader societal unease about Britain's traumatic imperialist encounters with foreign cultures. Appealing to the anxieties and appetites of his audience, in the novel Conan Doyle's decision to place colonial figures, such as Tonga and Jonathan Small, within a British social context, addresses popular concerns that the pursuit of the colonial enterprise will dangerously blur boundaries between enlightened Britain and the Empire. *The Sign of the Four* symbolically represents nationwide fears for homeland security, presenting a foreign intruder threatening Britain's internal security.

Within Conan Doyle's stories, Sherlock Holmes also represents the imperialist confidence and biased western perspectives of Victorian society. The detective is portrayed as a symbol of British rationality, intelligence and superiority; and Holmes approaches foreign influences with curiosity - treating the east as a threat to be subdued - making him for Said a 'central authority for the orient'¹⁸⁰. Through Holmes' encounters with the 'other' Conan Doyle establishes him as an embodiment of imperial authority: a figure easing chaos through knowledge and control. The particular mysteries he is set to solve reflect the British Empire's wider attempts to unravel the perplexities of the east through a general assertion of authority. This is evident in *The Sign of the Four*, in which Holmes states 'detection is, or ought to be, an exact science, and should be treated in the same cold and unemotional manner'¹⁸¹. His commitment to order contrasts with Conan Doyle's eastern characters, who are portrayed as impulsive, emotional and at times animalistic, so emphasising the Victorian view of British society as civilised in contrast to the 'untamed east'. As such, Said's orientalist insights explain Holmes' role as an agent of the Empire, in which 'the Orient was almost a European invention ... a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes'¹⁸². Holmes' investigations serve to demystify the appearance of these 'exotic beings' in Britain, restoring order by reinforcing the boundaries between the familiar (British) and the foreign (eastern). In his characterisation

176 A. Conan Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet* (London, 1887), p. 1.

177 A. Conan Doyle, *The Sign of the Four* (London, 1890).

178 A. Conan Doyle, *The Sign of the Four*.

179 E. Said, *Orientalism*.

180 E. Said, *Orientalism*.

181 A. Conan Doyle, *The Sign of the Four*.

182 E. Said, *Orientalism*.

of Holmes, Conan Doyle both entertains and reassures Victorian audiences, reinforcing British superiority whilst also subtly exposing the Empire's dependence on the notion of an 'other' to sustain its identity. *The Adventure of the Speckled Band* is one of the Sherlock Holmes stories in which Conan Doyle most showcases Victorian fears and fascination with the 'exotic' east. The antagonist, Dr. Grimesby Roylott, is a British man who has spent many years in India and returns to Britain bringing back elements of the Orient. These include a dangerous knowledge of exotic animals and violent behaviour, his temper 'intensified by his long residence in the tropics'¹⁸³. His characterisation implies a British willingness to blame imperfections in their own society on inferior colonised countries, reflecting an assertion of power. Dr Roylott uses a venomous Indian snake - the 'speckled band' - as his weapon, symbolising the way in which eastern influences are seen as sinister and lethal threats when on British soil. Conan Doyle intensifies this sense of otherness by describing Roylott's associations with India as unfamiliar and corrupting. As Holmes says, 'he has imbibed in India some curious practices which may suggest the line of investigation'¹⁸⁴. This is another instance of Conan Doyle reinforcing the Victorian stereotype that exposure to eastern cultures corrupts British purity and power, for Said an orientalist fear that foreign elements could disrupt British stability and security. Throughout *The Adventure of the Speckled Band*, Conan Doyle both dives into and critiques the era of orientalist assumptions, presenting the east as a source of fascination and terror.

The British Empire's reliance on orientalism reveals deep insecurities and traumas rooted in its colonial endeavours. By presenting eastern cultures as exotic, dangerous and lower in status, Victorian society created an 'other' to affirm British civility, strength and superiority. Yet orientalism also masked a fear that exposure to the foreign might disrupt Britain's stability. Said too emphasises this psychological aspect, explaining that the Orient became 'an integral part of European material civilisation and culture'¹⁸⁵. As he implies, the Empire's own anxieties and the unresolved trauma of colonisation have permanently affected Britain itself. This trauma manifested itself in a pervasive fear that Britain's identity and values were vulnerable to contamination by the very places and people it sought to dominate. Conan Doyle's stories often explore this theme. Orientalist portrayals allowed Britain to project its insecurities outward, suggesting Britain's attempts to maintain imperial control through a constructed 'other' were a reflection of the fragility of its own identity. Therefore orientalism served as a means to manage the trauma of large scale colonisation, whilst disclosing the Empire's own anxieties about its moral and cultural stability.

On the whole, Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories offer a complex perspective on the anxieties and insecurities underpinning British imperialism during Victorian times. Holmes and Watson, as symbols of British rationality, encounter eastern 'others' cast as exotic threats, embodying the cultural and moral superiority the Empire sought to maintain. However, Watson's lingering war injuries and Holmes' encounters with 'foreign' characters subtly critique this superiority, illustrating the lasting psychological trauma colonialism had on Britain itself. Said's concept of orientalism explains this need to project control over the east, reinforcing Britain's sense of identity whilst hiding internal vulnerabilities. Conan Doyle's depiction of eastern antagonists, including Tonga's animalistic fury and Dr Roylott's sinister knowledge, enhances Victorian fears of cultural contamination. Through these characters and oriental features, Doyle exposes Britain's dependence on an 'other' for identity and security, revealing unhealed wounds from colonial ambitions and weaknesses in British society.

183 A. Conan Doyle, *The Adventure of the Speckled Band* (London, 1892), p. 7.

184 A. Conan Doyle, *The Adventure of the Speckled Band*, p. 4.

185 E. Said, *Orientalism*, p. 2.

How far can criminals be held responsible for their crimes when influenced by mental illness? An examination of Ted Bundy and the limits of accountability.



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The question of the relationship between mental illness and criminal responsibility is amongst the most complex issues in criminal justice. Mental illness can impair an individual's capacity to understand, restrain or reflect upon their actions. Thus a judgement of limited accountability is sometimes warranted. Other disorders, however, present a different kind of challenge, for instance psychopathy, which is a severe form of antisocial personality disorder. While individuals with psychopathy often lack empathy and moral restraint, paradoxically they may still show cognitive understanding and self-regulation. Such a paradox goes to the heart of the problem of drawing the line between influence and responsibility when considering criminal actions driven by mental conditions. Perhaps the most salient example of this paradox is Ted Bundy. He was one of the most prolific serial offenders of the 1970s and committed countless brutal murders, primarily targeting young women. Late in life he was diagnosed with psychopathy, which not only causes a lack of empathy and remorse but a significant compulsion to dominate others. Despite this, Bundy was highly intelligent, charismatic and able to distinguish between right and wrong; and he used these qualities to manipulate and deceive both his victims and the forces of law and order. Indeed, even if his mental illness influenced his criminality, Bundy and those like him, whose disorders include elements of awareness and control, do not relinquish responsibility. As such, his case suggests that whilst psychopathy might disable empathy, it does not excuse crimes including clear intent and understanding.

To examine the legal and ethical complexities of the Bundy case, it is first necessary to establish a clear understanding of criminal responsibility: the standard by which the law determines accountability in cases involving mental illness. Individuals can be held responsible for their actions if they possess the ability to comprehend consequence and differentiate between right and wrong; and, generally, the law stipulates that for someone to be deemed criminally responsible, they must exhibit *mens rea*: action with intent, awareness and understanding of the criminal nature of their deeds. In the absence of this mental state, courts may consider a defence of insanity or similar¹⁸⁶. This standard is crucial to distinguish between those who intentionally commit crimes and those whose mental condition hinders their ability to understand or control their actions. While criminal responsibility hinges on intent, certain mental illnesses can affect a person's capacity to have *mens rea*. Legal concepts, such as the defences of insanity or diminished capacity, recognise that severe mental disorders can hinder judgement or self-control. For instance, the defence of insanity is applicable when an individual cannot differentiate between right and wrong, as seen in certain cases of psychosis, so removing full accountability. However, diminished capacity does not absolve someone of a crime, but it may lessen their responsibility if mental illness impacted their ability fully to manage their actions¹⁸⁷. However, Bundy's case adds a further complexity to these concepts. His psychopathy diminished his empathy but did not

¹⁸⁶ 'Criminal Responsibility: Evaluation and Overview' *Maryville University* (25/5/2021).

¹⁸⁷ 'Mental Health Conditions and Disorders: Draft Prosecution Guidance' *Crown Prosecution Service* (12/3/2019).

impair his cognitive understanding, as he meticulously planned and carried out his crimes with clear awareness. For the psychologist Thomas Widiger, Bundy was an example of a ‘successful psychopath’¹⁸⁸. He was able to manipulate others while maintaining a ‘mask of sanity’, underscoring the unique challenge of holding such individuals to account when their disorders restrict their moral restraint but not intent¹⁸⁹. Psychopathy, as illustrated by Bundy’s case, poses a distinct challenge to the concept of criminal responsibility. Unlike other conditions which diminish awareness, psychopathy specifically impacts empathy and moral judgement while preserving cognitive understanding. This means that individuals like Bundy, who demonstrate clear planning and intent, can still be held accountable, although they lack the moral restraint found in non-psychopathic individuals. This distinction is vital, highlighting the importance of carefully assessing mental conditions in criminal law, especially when moral inhibition is compromised but cognitive awareness is intact¹⁹⁰.

Having established the basic framework for an understanding of criminal responsibility and mental illness, we can now turn to a deeper exploration of Bundy’s specific psychological diagnosis and how it shaped his actions. Bundy was diagnosed with an antisocial personality disorder in its most serious form. He was unable to show empathy and remorse, and showed a lack of concern about breaking social rules, so framing his manipulative personality. Bundy’s psychopathy was also untypical, since he also showed a very strong narcissistic personality trait. He had a grandiose belief in his own superiority. For Al Carlisle, the psychologist who assessed Bundy, this helped form and develop Bundy’s manipulative capacity to be charming, deceptive and without remorse, as he sought to control others¹⁹¹. He also showed sadistic tendencies, enjoying inflicting pain upon his victims and enforcing their complete submission to him¹⁹². Thus, a combination of his psychopathy, narcissism and sadism provided Bundy with an ability to plan and perform crimes with haunting calculation, devoid of feeling and empathy. For Hervey Cleckley, the ‘mask of sanity’ of psychopaths like Bundy, meant he was seemingly normal externally, but hid his true aberrant motivations. In committing these crimes, Bundy possessed a disturbingly composed yet highly conscious mind. Bundy would plan an attack with rigorous care, frequently using his wit and intelligence to ensnare victims by feigning injury or acting authoritatively, for example by pretending to be a police officer. In one interview, he confessed ‘the fantasy that accompanies and generates the anticipation that precedes the crime is always more stimulating than the immediate aftermath of the crime itself’¹⁹³. This shows the deliberation and premeditation behind his crimes as well as his satisfaction in contemplating committing them. Bundy did not act impulsively. His mannerisms were calm and calculated, showing a mind preplanning his brutal actions, whilst at the same time justifying them. Psychologists recognised Bundy would go back to his crime scenes to re-live the power he had demonstrated. This evidence of Bundy’s need to dominate led him to commit highly consistent crimes. His emotionless disposition in committing the murders also establishes his complete cognitive understanding of them, leaving little question as to his intent and responsibility¹⁹⁴.

188 S. N. Mullins-Sweatt, N. G. Glover, K. J. Derefinko, J. D. Miller & T. A. Widiger, ‘The Search for the Successful Psychopath’ *Journal of Research in Personality* (August, 2010), pp. 554-558.

189 H. M. Cleckley, *The Mask of Sanity: An Attempt To Clarify Some Issues about the So-Called Psychopathic Personality* (Augusta, 1988).

190 B. Brogaard, ‘Psychopathy and the Mask of Sanity’ *Psychology Today* (15/6/2022).

191 A. Carlisle, *I’m Not Guilty: The Case of Ted Bundy* (Queensland, 2012).

192 ‘Examining Serial Killer Ted Bundy: A Classic Power/Control Killer’ *Psychology Today* (30/12/2019).

193 ‘Examining Serial Killer Ted Bundy: A Classic Power/Control Killer’.

194 A. Beeman, ‘The Reason Ted Bundy Sometimes Returned to His Crime Scenes’ *Grunge* (17/9/ 2021).

There are two central ways for the criminal law system to determine the influence of mental illness on crimes. The first is the M’Naghten rule, established in England in 1843. It assesses legal insanity based on the defendant’s ability to understand the nature of their act and its consequences. The concept focuses on cognitive impairment during the offence¹⁹⁵. The Model Penal Code was then created by the American Law Institute in 1962, introducing the concept of ‘diminished capacity’¹⁹⁶. This allows for a partial defence when a criminal doesn’t have the ability to form a specific intent central to the crime, for example when planning a murder. This procedure would not excuse a crime but it could minimise the charges. Indeed, it considers the ‘irresistible impulse’¹⁹⁷. This recognises that individuals might act on instinct and potentially not be able to control their actions due to mental illness¹⁹⁸. When applying these concepts to Bundy, both would align him with accountability for his actions. The M’Naghten rule would find him responsible, as he was aware of his actions and knew they were wrong. Bundy’s careful planning and evasion of law enforcement prove this. Furthermore, his mental state was clear, making him fully responsible in terms of the concept of ‘diminished capacity’ central to the Model Penal Code.

Those who would show leniency to individuals with psychopathy do so by pointing to their mental state. Psychopathy disrupts the subjective capability for empathy and moral judgement, and so may diminish guilt. They further claim that psychopathy is a neurological disorder, affecting the parts of the brain regulating emotional processing and impulse control. Thus, the criminal cannot help their behaviour. This view argues for the potential unfairness of punitive sentences for such offenders because, while existing law does consider the contribution of mental disorders to the criminal act, it may not fully account for conditions like psychopathy, with its lack of empathy and remorse but continued cognitive awareness. Those who propose therapeutic jurisprudence, argue that such interventions should concentrate on managing the disorder, emphasising rehabilitation rather than retribution. Such practices focus on healing rather than punishment¹⁹⁹. While acknowledging the influence psychopathy has on behaviour, opponents of such leniency argue that Bundy and others still maintain sufficient cognitive awareness regarding the nature and consequences of their actions to make reduced charges a poor decision and an irresponsible threat to society. Evidence also indicates that psychopathy is not treatable, casting doubt on rehabilitation. Indeed, critics insist that criminal justice requires a balance between mercy and community protection, and argue that whatever an individual like Bundy’s mental state, someone who commits such crimes should stand accountable in the court of law. This view is based on the so-called principle of ‘cognizance’²⁰⁰. One does not have to prove more than an act’s wrongfulness for a charge of criminal liability, even in the face of mental illness²⁰¹.

Bundy provides us with valuable insights into how mental illness and criminal responsibility intersect, revealing key considerations to be considered when examining accountability. Whereas mental illness can diminish responsibility, not all disorders do. Bundy’s case points to this distinction, as psychopathy impaired his empathy but left his understanding and intent intact. Legal standards such as the M’Naghten Rule and Model Penal Code indicate full accountability in cases in which the defendants understand their actions and consequences. This is a call to the justice system to weigh up any feelings of empathy regarding the

195 ‘M’Naghten Rule’ *Legal Information Institute* (June, 2020).

196 ‘Diminished Capacity’ *Legal Dictionary* (14/3/2017).

197 ‘The Model Penal Code Test for Legal Insanity’ *FindLaw* (9/12/2023).

198 ‘Insanity Defence’ *Legal Information Institute* (June, 2023).

199 C. Heginbotham, ‘Therapeutic Jurisprudence and Psychopathy’ in *Therapeutic Jurisprudence and Criminal Law*, (London, 2000).

200 ‘Cognizance by Magistrate: An Overview’ *The Daily Guardian*, (8/4/2021).

201 B. K. Sharma, ‘Concept of Cognizance under Criminal Law’, *International Journal of Law* (2019).

defendant's mental state against the need to protect society. For Bundy, it was finally ruled that he had full responsibility for his entirely aware, deliberate acts. He was convicted and executed on January 24, 1989, in Florida State Prison. This shows that even in the most severe cases of personality disorder, accountability must, if justified, be upheld. Individuals with a clear understanding of their actions and intent must be held liable to ensure justice and public safety.

