

Article

# Subjunctivity

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**Abstract:** We explore the value of the subjunctive mood as a template for understanding ethical action and the theological ontology that undergirds it. We do this by examining the use of a strange but very precisely used word in the writing of a theologian and minister and poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge: "silly." We do so in the name of exploring the value of contingency, accidentality and abjection to a general theory of ecological thought.

**Keywords:** theology; philosophy; ecology; Coleridge; Heidegger; abjection; Kristeva

Oh sleep! it is a gentle thing,  
Beloved from pole to pole!  
To Mary Queen the praise be given!  
She sent the gentle sleep from Heaven,  
That slid into my soul.  
The silly buckets on the deck,  
That had so long remained,  
I dreamt that they were filled with dew;  
And when I awoke, it rained.  
(Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*) [1]

The Ancient Mariner has just been liberated from the albatross, which "Instead of the cross" was hung "about [his] neck" (2.141–142) by the Mariner's crew, who superstitiously blame him for causing their ship to be becalmed in sultry sinister waters, having, in addition, pinned on his killing the blame (and praise) for the fog and mist and for the breeze (2.107–142). The ship of Death has arrived and departed, with Death and his viral mate "The Night-mare LIFE-IN-DEATH" (3.193) having instantly killed all the Mariner's crew before his eyes (3.216–223). So far, so merciless.

Grief-stricken and horrified, the Mariner has gazed on the "rotting sea" and, by accident, that is, without purpose or reason, he has admired the water snakes. Despite their initially horrific appearance, they seem beautiful, suddenly, in an unspeakable way: "No tongue/Their beauty might declare" (4.282–283). Either the water snakes are unspeakably beautiful or they are so ghastly that no one in their right mind would call them beautiful. Either way, what the Mariner feels is beyond concept, and he "blesse[s] them unaware", that is to say, unconsciously (4.285). Samuel Taylor Coleridge's well-known poem is exploring an extreme instance of beauty beyond ideas of what counts as beautiful, a realm which has all the phenomenological "feel" of science, without its content: just a succession of strange, potentially disturbing, disgusting, even horrifying data that strangely overlap with beauty and tenderness. A scientist, the poem argues, is an extreme aesthete for whom the conventional concept of pleasure and its seeming opposite, disgust, do not apply. In a way, disgust is simply too much or too little pleasure, not its binary opposite.

The "truth-feel" of the Mariner's exclamation, "O happy living things!" (4.282), is precisely "a spring of love" (4.284), which arrives at what is most provocative in Kant's



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Third Critique: a judgment as such is a spontaneous intuition that “I” do not manufacture, and I can know its truth because, like everything else, truth has a “feel” or a phenomenology, the “ring of truth”, which Kant calls beauty [2]. This “feel” or affect arises like a specter unbidden like the Death ship, but, unlike the Death ship, it is not fatal: it might be disturbing, potentially fatal even—those water snakes might or might not be killers—but, for now, there is no violence. The data (what is given, Latin *dare*, to give) are merciful; the data *of* the data, their “data-ness”, are in the key of mercy.

The cruciform albatross “s[inks]/Like lead into the sea” (4.291) and the Mariner falls asleep, returning to quiescence, the default state of life without a “subject”, without free will, without personhood defined as a conscious style of presentation: the “ground state” of being alive, to use quantum theoretical terminology. Sleep “slides” into his “soul”, and water falls into the “silly buckets”: the Mariner’s path towards quiescence is a passive one in which sleep slides into his soul as water falls into the silly buckets. “Silly” is a surprising word even in this surprising poem, a “silly” word even, in and out of context, its two-syllable sound suggesting a playful rocking, a trochee which inverts the pounding iambic tetrameter of the ballad verse. “Silly” is, in fact, a mysterious and wonderfully multivalent word. It in part suggests a fascination with snakes the Mariner expresses in Book IV yet amplified: “silly” is a term of endearment.

But there are additional senses of “silly” that go beyond the snakes. While the snakes seem to perform something like a skill, they are “flashy” and “glossy” and “velvet” (4.279)—they manage to be conventionally beautiful like fireworks, even as they are also “slimy” and disturbing—so “silly” suggests a form of disability or incompetence. But the reader does not feel this silliness as the opposite of the graceful movements of the water snakes. Readers have just witnessed the Mariner exclaiming at the “happy living things”: “silly”, rhyming with “happy”, is an intensification of the weakness of blurting out that sort of thing about quite gross-looking snakes that, admittedly, dance gracefully. Only this time the Mariner is looking at useless buckets. The grace in the gracefulness is the trace that the snakes’ embodied “grossness” leaves behind in the water as it cleaves and carves sluices through its expanse.

The buckets are being personified but not as able-bodied, “competent” performers that function smoothly, dancing like the snakes, the “happy living things” (4.282): “glossy”, “happy”, and “silly” rhyme but in a way that patriarchal poetics describes as “feminine” (on the off syllable). Whatever they are doing, the buckets are “silly” in the sense that they are perhaps “giddy” or “anomalous” or somehow “broken”—the connotations are manifold and strange. The Mariner could not have said “O silly living things!”, but he almost does; the next thing we read of is the “silly buckets on the deck”.

A cursory glance at the *Oxford English Dictionary* reveals the curious multivalency of “silly”. As a Unitarian minister profoundly steeped in radical politics and anti-slavery, Samuel Taylor Coleridge profoundly understood the aesthetic–theological valences of the word. He knew not just how the burgeoning importance of science threatened the value of the nonhuman world but also the extent to which this was all reflected in imperial England’s posture toward a world made abject and subservient under its gaze.

It may surprise the reader (but not Coleridge) that the OED records the first senses of “silly” as “Chiefly *Scottish*” and pertaining to “worthiness or blessedness”. These citations, dating back as far as 1450, also include a sacred tinge in such juxtapositions as “Worthy, good” and “pious, holy”. This is certainly how Shakespeare uses the word, near to its common adoption in English, in *The Passionate Pilgrim* (“A silly cross”). A cognate sense is “Auspicious, fortunate” (from 1650). But just as significant are the second senses of “silly”, which have to do with animals, women, and children and relate to “weakness, vulnerability, or physical incapacity”. That *silly* can mean “Helpless, defenceless, powerless; frequently with the suggestion of innocence or undeserved suffering” is how the term can apply to “The poore cillie Mouse” (a phrase from William Bullein’s 1564 medical treatise on the plague). “Silly” is an epithet frequently applied to sheep, says the dictionary. While this sense of “silly” is now “*Scottish* and *rare*” when it applies also to women and children

(from 1539), recall that Coleridge's poem is written in a fake old-fashioned Scots dialect—as if Macbeth had decided to go on an ocean pilgrimage. In case this sounds outlandish, consider that Macbeth is also driven by unconscious desires, becomes contaminated by the stigma of his evil, is (like the Mariner) surprisingly passive in the face of supernatural visions and witchy apparitions, and witnesses his own life “Creep[ing] in this petty pace from day to day, /To the last syllable of recorded time” (5.5.19–20) [3].

Yet, a third sense of “silly” applies to the buckets as so-called “inanimate objects”. The *OED* attributes “Originally and chiefly” to the Scottish the rendering of silly as “Meagre, poor, trifling; of little significance, substance, or value; *spec.* (of soil or earth) poor in quality or fertility. Now rare”. This is the sense in which the buckets are useless or unproductive: presumably on deck for bailing out flood water, they have never been employed because the becalmed, deadly ocean has not yet required them. The earliest citation the dictionary records is from a translation of Aesop's Fables in 1500: “It was ane semple wane. . . .Ane sillie scheill vnder ane erdfast stane” (“It was a simple house. . . a silly shell under a stone stuck in the ground”). This sense of “silly” is diminutive, belittling, and opens onto two related ones dating from the mid-1500s: that “Of a person or (esp.) an animal: weak, feeble, frail; lacking strength, size, or endurance” and that “Of an inanimate object: weak, flimsy, trifling; lacking strength, size, or substance. Now *Scottish* and *rare*”. Hence also the sense “*Scottish* and *English regional (northern)*. Sickly, ailing, in poor health; weak or feeble due to illness or infirmity”.

“Silly” also invites a compassionate response to the feebleness it describes (citations from 1522 onward), as in the endearing phrase “poor little thing”: “That provokes sympathy or compassion; that is to be pitied; unfortunate, wretched. Now *rare (English regional (northern) and Scottish in later use)*”. The Mariner, a Scotsman who for an English person is an enfeebled, colonized being, speaks a dialect about endearing, feeble, useless buckets, a locution which itself embodies these aspects of the “silly”. Even the imagined Scots accent renders him some combination of cute, pathetic, alien yet familiar, from long ago and far away, like his story of travel to the far-off lands of mist and snow, the “because it's there” imperialism of English ambition defamiliarized as the “you-had-to-be-there” absurdity of his enfeebling phantasmagorical torment.

The third main region of “silly” has to do with “Senses relating to simplicity of character or form and (by extension) to foolishness or mental incapacity”. Again, citations of this date from the mid-1500s, when England was getting involved with Scotland in all kinds of ways: “Of a person or a person's character, speech, actions, etc.: simple, rustic; lacking sophistication or refinement; (hence) ignorant, uneducated”; “Of a person: of humble rank or status; lowly”; “Of a thing (concrete or abstract): plain, simple, uncomplicated; rustic, homely”; “Of a person: lacking in judgement or common sense; foolish, thoughtless, empty-headed; characterized by ridiculous or frivolous behaviour”; “Of words, actions, ideas, etc.: characterized by or associated with foolishness. Of a thing: causing amusement or derision; having a comical appearance”; and “Originally and chiefly *Scottish*. Mentally impaired or retarded”.

This last sense discloses a pejorative and abject register of disability. That is to say, he reacts to the tale as if he has been smacked on the head with a plank. There are many other moments in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* in which people are deprived of normalized consciousness, hypnotized, swooning, or driven insane:

He holds him with his glittering eye—  
The Wedding Guest stood still,  
And listens like a three years' child. . . (1.13–15)

Thus, “The Wedding Guest here beat his breast,/Yet he cannot choose but hear” (1.37–38); the ice “cracked, and growled, and roared, and howled/Like noises in a swound” (a swoon, (1.62)); later the Mariner “[falls] down in a swound” (5.392). The zombie sailors, killed by Death and his mate and now reanimated as “They raised their limbs like lifeless tools” and “They groaned, they stirred, they all uprose,/Nor spake, nor moved their eyes”

(5.331–332). The Pilot's boy, rescuing the Mariner from the sinking ship, goes crazy and "his eyes went to and fro" on seeing the horrifying features of the Mariner: "The Devil knows how to row" (7.569). The Mariner himself is a record: a victim of post-traumatic stress disorder compelled to repeat his tale, he wanders "like night, from land to land" (7.586), automatically identifying his hearers, grabbing them, and regaling them with "There was a ship" (1.10). His very presence, in and as the poem itself, is a type of stunning, as if we have been knocked out and come to wonder "Who on Earth is this homeless guy standing in front of this church?" and encounter the first line of the poem: "It is an ancient Mariner" (1.1). The "always-already" of Heidegger and Derrida suggests a primordial ignorance, delusion, or unconsciousness.

The eighth sense of silliness as foolishness or simplicity has to do with concussion: "Originally *English regional*. Stunned, stupefied, or dazed, as by a blow. *Esp.* in ***to knock (also slap) a person silly***". This sense talks to the way the Wedding Guest "went like one that had been stunned,/ And is of sense forlorn" (7.622–623). The Oxford Dictionary seems to become silly itself here, bolding and italicizing its examples like a chunk of wood aimed at one's head: "*colloquial*. In phrases denoting actions carried out thoroughly or to an excessive degree, *esp.* to the extent that the person involved or affected is no longer capable of thinking or acting sensibly, as ***to drink oneself silly, to bore a person silly, to scare a person silly***, etc.". The hollow men held up as straw targets for incipient fascism by T.S. Eliot are silly in this sense:

We are the stuffed men  
Leaning together  
Headpiece filled with straw. Alas! (*The Hollow Men*, 2–4)

Good for them.

It is at the arrival of "the silly buckets on the deck" that *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* itself becomes a *silly poem*, revealing a silliness which was otherwise obscured beneath the "sheen" of horror and beauty and tragedy. . . This is, after all, a poem written in a fake and "antiqued" Scots dialect that says things like "unhand me, grey-beard loon!" (1.11). This is a silly poem, above and beyond its disturbing flashiness, its old-fashioned mechanized rhythmical economy, and its threatening stop-motion cartoon efficiency that describes the course of a day in the course of four lines:

The Sun came up upon the left  
Out the sea came he  
And he shone bright and on the right  
Went down into the sea. (1.25–28)

Such uncanny poetry unfolds like stop-motion animation, whether bringing the dead to life or revealing a strange liveliness in seemingly inert materials. Note the way the sun moves like an orange circle on a stick behind a screen in a Punch and Judy show on the beach. Nature is denatured here into the supernatural by being ridiculously sped up, and the effect is at once "silly" and frightening. Mariner and poem also experience denaturing in this moment, which ushers in the hallucinatory fifth part of the poem. Both appear exhausted as if appearing after vomiting, and they rest there just observing with eyes and ears that are themselves being "silly" by just staring—"gawking" even—for no particular reason. It is in this moment of complete vacancy, of silly empty-headedness, that a dream fills the Mariner's brain and that water fills the buckets. Those buckets do not fill with that brackish water that everyone had to drink when the ship was becalmed nor do they fill with the majestic inaccessible ice "as green as emerald" (1.54): the buckets fill with drinkable, delicious water of life, from heaven.

While it is insulting for a person to be called silly, it is endearing when we use the term to describe a thing. We explore this strange crisscross of endearment, uncanniness, and abjection, a silliness which crosses the poem like that winged cross, the albatross ("At length did cross an Albatross", (1.63)). Every cross "hung about" one's neck is an albatross

insofar as it endangers silliness, the pure contingency of meaningless suffering which the cross represents, by acting as a token to ward off bad luck: it becomes Fatima's Hand, abjuring the evil eye with a glinting gaze (a "glittering eye", *Ancient Mariner* (1.13)) which is evil as such, a silly thing taken too seriously. Or—since images are reversible—the silly excess of a cross, particularly from the viewpoint of a Unitarian minister with no claims of the divinity of Jesus, is in fact an index of its powerful "weakness", a trinket which speaks of unbearable pain, a silly piece of jewelry which does not perform its function as a token of luxury or status, a useless bucket on a becalmed ship.

The cross is the very index of evil welcomed, invited, feeding on the worms in your biscuits ("The food it ne'er had eat", in the later version of the *Ancient Mariner*, 1.67). The pure contingency of evil, like a gigantic bird "crossing" your path, its fundamental accidentality, is what the Passion renders palpable: "forgive them; for they do not know what they do" (Luke 23:34); the spectators and the soldiers, the Christ deniers, and the cocks crowing spontaneously at the sunrise, everyone else is performing like zombified sailors or stunned, hypnotized Wedding Guests or graceful snakes or silly buckets or a spring of love blurted out in the form of "O happy living things", or a PTSD narrative, a walking talking poem called *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, its hair matted and encrusted with ice ("rime") and age, itself a greybeard loon (1.11), the homeless guy at the traffic lights.

The Albatross has slipped off, water has slipped in, and the poem has become giddy, collecting data for the sake of data, as if the Mariner were just a radio telescope or a Petri dish or a rain gauge, a bucket filling with dew. The Mariner has to be one of the most "passive" characters in literature, yet, now, at the start of the pure phantasmagoria which is the fifth part of *The Ancient Mariner*, this silliness is an ethical stance, as if being a scientist were, deep down, just this silliness: simply collecting data for their own sake, like an uncool aesthete (and, therefore, a hugely amplified one). One of the authors of this essay (Morton) did not fully understand this part of the poem, despite having carefully read (and staged and taught) it since the age of twelve—until they had COVID and became silly. The "Nightmare Life-in-Death" of a virus rendered them weak and feeble enough to understand the contemplation-in-extremis that, in the poem, causes science and mysticism to overlap.

The cross has fallen: this is the "It is accomplished" moment of the Passion of Christ, translated, the absolutely disturbing undergoing of experience and cruelty, leaving Jesus high and dry. What has been accomplished? Above and beyond the suffering and the cruelty, every action has been reduced to its ground state, to a minimal "silliness" for which there is no aesthetic or moral or political (and so on) justification: "forgive them; for they do not know what they do" (Luke 23:34). Silliness is next to godliness, and life goes on, beyond even the utter absurdity of absolutely meaningless suffering.

To obtain a sense of the truth of this spiritual silliness, imagine if Jesus had winked at passersby on his way up Calvary, saying "Don't worry—this all has a point that will be made clear in time" or "Have no fear, I'll take revenge on these bastards in the end". Or "Stick around for the sequel—it's going to be Hell on Earth!" or some such phrase that would bestow meaning on the event, depriving it of its sacred silliness.

The absolute silliness of the Passion is the phenomenology of its sacramental mystery. It is a hybrid that crosses the absolute ignorance on the part of a looker-on as to what this abjection accomplishes with Christ's own powerful acceptance of suffering as the ultimate act of restraint, the ultimate refusal to make a point. The result is a paradox of complete open-endedness in what seems like a closure, a brutal but final death, and the pure ignorance of the onlooker defined precisely as an overflow of the purest possibility, the purest contingency—meaninglessness as a manifold so full of possibility that it chokes you into silence.

This silly meaninglessness also inhabits Christ himself in the absolute reduction of his psyche to pain and his body to mangled flesh and exposed bone. Along the *via dolorosa*, from the cat-of-nine-tails to the cross, Christ literally becomes meaninglessness, utter abjection, sin. Consider the mind in pain as consciousness reduced to pure static. The whole scenario on the road to Golgotha is an event wholly reduced to its factors. Then,

taking power set upon power set shows the limit of such manifold possibility as an absolute ignorance about which of its parts will constitute the next event: absolute contingency as entropy, the possibility of everything in the actuality of nothing. It is, of course, silly that everything can exist in nothing. Yet there it is. That is the meaninglessness being described and that—at every instant—is our epistemological posture toward God, the universe, Christ.

Delving a little further into the phenomenon of silliness, we discover its “moving part”, a strange and haunting engine we call *subjunctivity*. What is silly about the buckets is that they endear themselves to one, like a teddy bear: we know they are “just inanimate objects”, but it is *as if they are not*. They are animate but not in a categorical sense of being alive rather than dead or inanimate. They are endearing, like people can be: “Silly old Bear” (*Winnie the Pooh*) [4]. But we know they are not people, or we know that what we name when we call someone “silly” is not a substantially person-like trait but that in them which acts like a bucket or a soft toy, just sagging or lolling or clanking, an inertia that is barely animate, abject even, certainly not a mark of subjectivity but not an objective trait either. The “silly”, like Kant’s beauty, cannot be decisively located “in” the object or “in” the subject, defying the dualism which, in the end, is conditioned by the master–slave template [5]. Kant’s discovery of the beautiful represents an astonishing gap in the philosophical transmission of this template.

What is disturbing and abject about Christopher Smart’s “silly fellow” is what is also endearing and “sweet”, cute but not integrated or integrative: subjunctively alive, as if animate, as if a person, but not quite. “Silly” is more potently impotent than “happy” as in “O happy living things!”. To live is conventionally happy for utilitarianism. But silliness is not a utilitarian category: indeed, it seems to defy such categorization. The “as-if-ness” of subjunctivity is preserved in silliness, and we hold that this as-if-ness is what holds open the possibility of a genuinely *future* future, that is to say, a future which can be different from the past, an ecological commodity which is all too rare these days in thought and deed.

If silliness rather than doubling-down were admired as a valuable political tactic, for example, we would be in much better shape. When he was Mayor of Reykjavik, the stand-up comedian Jon Gnarr made full and brilliant use of his silliness in just this way. It is silly these days to claim in front of a large crowd that one does not know the answer to a question, that one is going to have to think about it and get back to the journalist who asked it the following day. But this silliness is shocking in the gentlest way, that is to say, the most powerful and effective way. Instead of doubling-down on the past, silliness jiggles a key in the keyhole of futurity [6].

Silliness is far from the stigma of “bare life”: silliness is the ground state of life as *thumos*, as vibration or quivering. Bare life pertains to zoe, to life as a juridical category: such and such a being “deserves” to live, in the most cruelly sparse manner. Silliness cannot condemn some beings to the zombified state of the “Musselmänner” because the phenomenology of silliness is subjunctivity. In Coleridge’s poem, silliness is a blissful respite, an oasis of childlike play in a desert of revenge and punishment, which picks up again not long after as the dead crew come to life and start to “work the ropes” and “curse” the Mariner with zombie stares: the “curse in a dead man’s eye” (4.260) is a curse because it does not look—it gazes. The phenomenology of beauty as “living” without purpose is silliness; and the phenomenology of silliness is subjunctivity, a quasi-animistic “as if” which is not the same as fetishistic disavowal (“I know very well that these buckets aren’t alive, but I’m going to see them that way in any case”).

When we see them anthropomorphically, buckets “refer” to the deck of the ship and to the “world” of sailing, in the Heideggerian sense of reference, but the “silly buckets” are not functioning simply as tools; the way they stand out is not because they are malfunctioning like a broken hammer or a hammer that hits my hand by accident when I am putting up a picture. But they do stand out in the poem insofar as they have never appeared before: they were always already “there” as part of the ship’s equipment (presumably for getting rid of

flooding seawater): the one thing we know about them is that they “had so long remained” (5.298). They served no purpose because there was no storm: indeed, the ship was eerily becalmed. The buckets endear themselves to the Mariner if only because they “refer” to or embody a care for human life that did not need to channel itself through their use. They served no purpose, and, in this sense, they overlap with the Winnie the Poohs of this world: they are “silly” because they stand out as useless, more useless even than the water snakes, who are, at any rate, about their business, disgusting as it might be to human eyes.

Life as such is “silly” insofar as it is pointless: a sensible lack of point would still have the aroma of a telos. A truly nihilistic sense of life would not be grim or loveless but joyful and playful. It is such a silliness that humans ought to seek out as they ponder how to resist the end of the world. Meeting apocalyptic seriousness with apocalyptic seriousness does not seem like the best tactic. Finding silliness in how things “live on”, more and less than what is meant by the living-on inherent in “survival” (that grim topic), is key. Darwinian “survival”, indeed, is profoundly silly insofar as it does not mean succeeding or being “fit” in the sense of “six-pack abs”. The “fit” is, if anything, silly: this lifeform just happens to “fit” because it was able to have offspring despite its accidental, inherently mutant, and “monstrous” contingency. If Steve Jobs had been in charge, human ears would be efficient pinpricks, not the silly cauliflowers they actually are.

Subjunctivity comes closest to what is sacred because it powers the phenomenon called silliness, the ground state of life-for-no-reason. What is sacred is life as accidental mercy on a universe of mechanical revenge, a reduction in entropy just for now, just in this thin sliver of a region of the universe where quantum-theoretical, negentropic phenomena are magnified as genetic mutation, symbiosis, and sexual display. The poem has mercy on its mechanical horror and the silly buckets have mercy on the thirsty sailors, too late for them to enjoy, but that is the point. The Mariner dreams them filled with potable dew as if they were resting in a garden somewhere in his native Scotland; and, when he wakes, it rains: we are not given a reason why or a consequence—it just rains.

“To Mary Queen the praise be given” (4.294) for sleep, the rain of life which slides into the Mariner’s soul, because Mary is the mother of God, the human whose body bears the “savior” in his least effective, silliest state. “Hail Mary, full of grace”, like a bucket filled with dew, says the prayer: silly Mary, since every instance of the protuberant state of grace called pregnancy is intrinsically silly, the mother’s body quite rightly trying to abort the foreign object, yet failing because of a retroviral piece of DNA which creates the smooth-coated placenta that resists pathogens and white blood cells, a silly addition to the body of a reptile which swallowed some meat and accidentally absorbed some DNA which became welded, symbiotically and for no reason, to its genome, thus creating monotremes and mammals [7]. A successful pregnancy, resulting in the moment called birth, is a *silly abortion*, the embryo and the mother’s body having failed to exact vengeance upon one another either by sucking their life out or by expelling them.

The Incarnation is not very much less silly either. St. Francis was quite right to invent the “Christmas crib” with its Nativity scene replete with daft cows and sheep, a silly birth in a silly barn, an excess over cosmological meaning embodied in the admirably scientific phenomenon of the anomalous Star out of joint, which, to their credit, the Zoroastrian Wise Men follow like good scientists. Being scientific is being silly, becoming a giant ear like a radio telescope, just collecting data for the sake of data, an extreme aestheticism without even the grace of knowing what kinds of exotic food and disgusting thing are in vogue: the very stance of the blown-open Mariner in the phantasmagorical fifth part of Coleridge’s poem. The silliness of being scientific thus overlaps with the silliness of the Passion.

The resurrected Jesus, mistaken for the gardener by Mary Magdalen (John 20:15)? That is just silly. Silliness, silliness everywhere. What is most obvious about the sacrament of the Eucharist is that it is silly: transubstantiation might or might not be what happens, but, even in that case, the bread and wine are initially nothing like the body and blood of anyone at all—that is the mystery of it. Saying “this is my body” about a piece of bread is about the silliest thing one can say about it. What is cataclysmic is the violent attempt

to bestow a teleological meaning on it all, for the bread to actually be or definitely not be the body. The *subjunctivity*, the as-if-my-body, of the bread, is what is being offered: not necessarily (just) a symbol, not necessarily a fully embodied incarnation, a full presence, but precisely a broken piece of something edible that the teeth and stomach will break further. Leavening is the silly action of yeast in wet flour. The biosphere in its potable and edible givenness is silly: above and beyond, or below and beyond, its function as a means of subsistence, it just happens to be “there”, like the buckets which “had so long remained”, or a loaf of bread one finds in a cupboard, or a soft toy which still hangs out on one’s bed for some reason. What is most strange about the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil is that there is no good reason *not* to eat its fruit. One has simply been ordered not to eat it. But there it is: silly tree.

Weakness is the superpower of superpowers: the ultimate man may have six-pack abs, but the Superman is playful; yet, deep down, play is not adept, despite how it looks like Superman is the one who, for instance, performs with effortless brio a jazz version of Rachmaninov’s *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* in Punxsutawney, Philadelphia (*Groundhog Day*), a jazzier for whom the inevitable death of at least one person who can never be saved, no matter how he iterates his actions on the day which repeats itself over and over, is just a necessary bum note. [8,9] Silliness is not just an inevitable error: that is why we say “it was a silly mistake”. Not all mistakes are silly. Some are just plain mistakes. Consider the mistake of saving just some humans on the part of a supposedly omnipotent God. Many assume that God is “playing silly buggers”, because surely a truly benevolent and all-powerful being would save everyone from burning. God is silly. The superman is playful, but playfulness is not always silliness.

Play is graceful, yet *grace is silly*, and play must, in the end, be silly because it refuses to turn into war: “It’s just a silly game” is what one says when, unfortunately, it is not. Simone Weil writes powerfully on faith in the void, but no one likes faith in the weak. Weil’s work is a constant play with and against the abjection of silliness. Fascism is the political aesthetic of “greatness” and strength of a bundle or gang of sticks (the *fasces*) that would be weak alone but, when bunched in a fist, become a weapon. For Weil, grace may be the upward leap that defies a universe of heaviness (gravity versus grace), but there is, in grace, something that is not graceful [10]. Grace sinks and slips like water tinkling into a bucket, bows repeatedly, nodding like a bobble head. The water snakes may be graceful, they “coiled and swam” with “flash[es] of golden fire”, but *grace as such is silly*, unreasonable, pointless, like a bucket which fills with rain well after the point at which sailors yearn for fresh water. Coleridge undoubtedly had this “gentle rain” in mind when he wrote of “gentle sleep”:

The quality of mercy is not strain’d.  
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven  
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:  
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.  
Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes  
The thronèd monarch better than his crown.  
His scepter shows the force of temporal power,  
The attribute to awe and majesty  
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;  
But mercy is above this scepter’d sway. (William Shakespeare) [11]

“King of Kings” cannot mean the head mafia boss. King of Kings must mean the phenomenological essence of king reduced to its playfulness, which, in the end, is silly. “Let’s not go to Camelot: it’s a silly place”, is the ultimate riposte to the fascist starter solution that is the Arthurian Grail myth: the directors of *Monty Python*, Cambridge graduates like Coleridge, knew what they were doing [12]. “The stone that the builders rejected” is the *silly* stone, the odd one out, the one which is of no use, flawed, absurd, excessive, lying around without a point to it. Silliness is the cornerstone of Christianity,



lying around so long that a poor animal lives under it, one which humans might confuse with a stone too: “Ane sillie scheill vnder ane erdfast stane”.

We propose a “flipped Gnosticism”. Unlike its all-too-serious counterpart, flipped Gnosticism is silly. Regular Gnosticism images an immortal timeless soul trapped in an evil physical world. What is radical is the precise opposite: an “immortal” yet timely body—which might include a “soul” but not as a spirit radically apart from that body—trapped in a prison house of ideas. A fundamental idea is the binarity of *mastery* and *slavery*. A host of other dualities line up underneath it: subject and object; male and female; active and passive; soul, indeed, and body. These ideas appear immediate, pregiven, just “there”, whereas the body, an actual lifeform inhabiting an actual biosphere “right now”, is phenomenologically the most distant thing in the universe. This body is the “stone that the builders rejected”, the abjection which has no place in ideas about and plans for and regimes which define and delimit it.

Above and beyond life as a concept (*bios*), or life as a juridical category (*zoē*), we propose life as quivering movement (*thumos*), as the timeliness of a “silly” body whose mortality is yet another idea that haunts its more fundamental and less tangible *natality*, the fact that it grew from a biosphere, which grew from a universe. Quantum motion is “silly”, or, as Eliot puts it, “gesture without motion” (*The Hollow Men*, 1.12), a waving or oscillating which does not exactly move yet does not exactly stay in place. “*This is the way the world ends/Not with a bang but a whimper*” (5.30–31): the “whimper” is, like “silly”, an onomatopoeia for a desultory flicker; but silly whimpering is also how life begins, the natal cry, the glimmer of mercy [13].

Life cannot possibly be anything that has to do with master and slave, that deadly serious template which structures all the others: subject and object, male and female, masculine and feminine, active and passive. Life is fundamentally neither slavish nor masterful. The very idea of vibration implies that life does not move “according to” something else. *Life as such is that something else*, a silly movement which reduces entropy by accident, putting the mechanical universe into slow motion, as if the Punch and Judy show of the Mariner’s hellish stop motion were slowed down so one could see the puppets dallying (*Hamlet*). Life is the universe’s comical slo-mo action replay. It is possible to slow entropy because it is possible to reverse entropy. Time can move slowly (it is called “alive”) because time can stop moving forwards. This is because entropy itself is not “forwards”. Entropy is not the same thing as telos. That things have an arrow is just a predator’s and, before, a survivor’s way of rationalizing their existence.

Weaponized concepts of *bios* and *zoe* are now destroying *thumos*, the human-friendly biosphere with its silly polar bears and other pointless lifeforms. It is precisely “life” in its ground or most basic state, its mere presence, that is at stake in the planetary emergency. That there is no really good reason why life should not just be a bunch of chemicals is the reason to destroy it—and the reason to preserve it. That is what is meant by “sacred”.

Something like the concept of “bodymind” would work well to describe what is said here using terms such as “body” and “soul”. The term has a provenance in Western interpretations of East Asian contemplative traditions, whose impact was primarily to undermine the dualism of body and soul. But the term bodymind also has a powerful application in disability studies (Margaret Price, Sami Schalk) [14]. This is telling and more fruitful than the “vanilla” usage of the term in describing Zen and yoga. It relates complexly to our revised, positive sense of “silliness” as a physical and aesthetic category.

What is most disturbing about the playfully weird Odradek, that neighborly spool of something or other in the Kafka story, is that Odradek is just “there” [15]. There it is, lurking somewhere on this side of the mirror. There it is, just sitting quietly in the kitchen, before you come down for breakfast. Quietly, or silently, giving off data that are disturbingly not quite signals, disturbingly not quite noise. There it is, already sitting in the chair before you realize you are. Your doppelgänger. Oneself, but with a still small voice, the voice of Odradek, the voice of God:

And he said, Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the LORD. And, behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the LORD; but the LORD was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the LORD was not in the earthquake: And after the earthquake a fire; but the LORD was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice. (1 Kings 19: 11–12) [16]

Finding God is like detecting a gravity wave: it is a subtractive process, as apophatic theology tells us. Fermilab's original LIGO experiment is moving for its brilliant economy (LIGO means "Laser Interferometry Gravitational Observatory"). Two lasers at right angles in tunnels underneath a field in Louisiana, beautifully calibrated, vibrate with everything that can make them vibrate. The vibrations are recorded. The recorded wave shows up on a computer screen. Scientists subtract every known wave from what shows up. The original experiment talked about the sound of cars on the highway, the noise of cows walking across the field, people arguing about the lasers in a nearby underground room. When every possible wave is subtracted, from seismic activity and wind (see above) to the rhythm of cows' hooves, and a little squiggle is left, a "silly" blip whose shape Einstein predicted, that is a gravity wave, a drop in the bucket of spacetime. The first detected squiggle was the trace of two New Jersey-sized black holes colliding a thousand light years away [17]. Unbelievably, the gravity wave arrived just thirty minutes after the lasers had been recalibrated more accurately than ever, on 14 September 2015 at 5:51 a.m. Eastern Daylight Time.

A gravity wave is not constantly present: rather the wave is a tiny evanescent flicker "inside" all the other possible waves, a drop of dew quietly plinking into a bucket in a dream. Despite its almighty cause, a gravity wave "passing by" is, like the Lord, a signal of astounding weakness, because life as such would be impossible anywhere much nearer to the kinds of collision which cause gravity waves. Newton had described gravity as God's love, instantaneous, omnipresent, uniform. But, for Einstein, gravity ripples and shimmers, like water wobbling in an unsteady bucket on a ship: more like real love, then. Simone Weil notwithstanding, gravity as such is graceful, and this grace is ultimately silly, spacetime wobbling like jelly, everything on Earth and Earth itself getting slower and larger by a tiny amount, then faster and smaller by a tiny amount, for femtoseconds. Life collects black hole data in the form of silliness. Anything stronger and there would be no life to detect anything. The universe is mercifully large.

Still voice, silly voice: already talking before one almost not-quite hears. Gnosticism calls it The Silence, but this is too serious: a still voice is sillier. Freud calls it the silence of the drives, the silly processes of being alive: life, utterly different from vitalist fascist immediacy; life, unfurling just off the corner of one's eye, the weakest signal possible, the feel of the default carrier wave of all the signals. How can a fish feel the water she swims in? How can one see one's own vision? How can one touch evolution or extinction?

"Still" is a fascinating word. Because it can be a noun and an adverb as well as an adjective; "still" indicates that something is and that this being is verbal, it is a happening, a movement. It sounds like a paradox, but there are plenty of still things that move: consider a mirage, or a hologram made of pulses of light, or a laser tunnel at a disco, or the surface of a lake, or a standing wave such as electric guitar feedback, or, indeed, the state of life we call *sleep*, or the sleeping state of the life we call the brain, which we call *dreaming*. "Still" indicates not total stasis but a gentle vibration, and this gentle vibration is the basic or default state of things according to the most accurate way of interpreting the universe that we know. Unlike thunder and fire and wind, electrical and chemical processes involving tremendous loudness, God appears as a wavering, holographic, standing-wave-like, dreamlike shimmer, a disturbingly gentle quietness which is not absolute silence.

"Still" indicates what in quantum theory is called "the ground state" of a thing. Nothing can have zero energy. So, everything has a ground state where its basic vibe is found. There are, as it were, yellow energy and purple energy but never transparent energy. Energy (and, therefore, matter) always has a default frequency and a default amplitude.

Life is an expression of quantum theory that says that things are still at their ground state. The still, small voice is God not as a chemical or as a physical being but as a living being, and this living being is at their or her or his ground state, their default state. Their very weakness is their virtue. The still, small voice is God as default. Not nothing. Nothing is pushing God. That is what “ground state” means. Nothing is pushing the matter, energy. It is just thrumming there of its own accord, shimmering without any mechanical input. Moving all by itself. Unlike thunder or fire or wind, which imply huge amounts of energy, God’s energy is the default energy, the non-zero ground state of the thing called “alive” or “asleep” or “dreaming”. Its preciousness is its faintness. Its *subjunctive* quality. Stillness is silly, the “so long remain[ing]” quality of a thing whether or not it is useful for a human or good to eat.

The thing called life is an “as if”, like the thing called sentience and the thing called intelligence. Life and sentience are, as it were, quiet or still: they are very slight shimmers of something that is, in another sense, just plowing ahead mechanically. Sentience is always a matter of “It’s *as if* this AI were sentient”. The Turing Test is terrific in this regard: if one can no longer distinguish whether or not the other is an AI, *they might (as well) be a person* [18]. Life lives on in the subjunctive mode: “It’s as if this replicator or this virus were alive, it might (as well) be alive”. Life is never shouted, as in the *Frankenstein* movie (“It’s alive!”) [19].

The “might (as well)” and the “as if” of the phenomenological essence of life have the quality we find in subjunctive verbs. It is impossible to say that “This is alive” and “that is not alive”. The binary is impossible. A “might (as well) be” always ends up ruling the day. This is true for genetic “code”, better thought as a cipher which *might (as well) be language* or code. The point is, it is never actually code, which is how it gets to be code [20].

The *subjunctive* quality of quantum motion as opposed to the indicative quality of mechanical motion is not just a hypothesis or a virtual reality or a “dream” considered as the content of the dream. One hears “subjunctive” as “non-existent” because of prejudices about what “exist” means. One assumes that “exist” means “to persist in constant presence”, like a flatlining hospital scanner. The image is apt: this is an image of dead matter. It is quite strange to think of God as a kind of inertia, but this is just what “omniscience” and “omnipresence”, not to mention “omnipotence”, imply. What Google is aiming for is an algorithmic version of the Scholastic God’s omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence, the slogan “Just don’t be evil” nodding sinisterly like a bobble-head.

Sentience is *the dream as physical thing*, the dream as the intrinsic vibration of the brain when asleep. Sleep is life at rest, dreaming. Life is chemistry at rest, dreaming. Subjunctive motion is not just an idea: *subjunctivity is inscribed in the real*. “I have a dream” opens up something real in one’s heart [21]. It is not just an idea. It is not just the content. The *Reverend* Martin Luther King (*italics ours*) knew what he was doing. To evoke the dreaminess is to evoke God: the subjunctive, “might be” quality of “I have a dream” is exactly what resists the activity of the indicative (“I dream of. . .”) and the passivity of the infinitive (“Oh, to dream of. . .”). “I have a dream” undermines the master versus slave, active versus passive binary. And another way “I have a dream” enacts subjunctivity is in the sense that one knows that “I do not ‘have’ this dream”: One has a dream in the same way as one has a house built for one. One does not *have* a dream as a possession. One has it in the same way in which one “has” the flu. “Having a dream” is in the *middle* voice, neither active nor passive. One is not the victim of the dream, nor is one its puppet master. It is simply how one’s brain flows when one is not being an “I”. Dreaming that the buckets are full of dew, then finding that it is raining—without any mention of the actual buckets filling with water—means that the dream has been fulfilled but in a silly way: the buckets are filled full, the dream is fulfilled, there is no point, just another data point.

The divine lives in this realm of *might (as well) be*, the subjunctive, middle realm also occupied by living phenomena such as life itself, sleep, and dreaming. The still, small voice has mercy on your ears: the *still, small voice might (as well) be merciful*, not revengeful. It makes one hesitate, wait, be still, and know that the voice belongs to God:

Come, behold the works of the LORD, what desolations he hath made in the earth. He maketh wars to cease unto the end of the earth; he breaketh the bow, and cutteth the spear in sunder; he burneth the chariot in the fire. Be still, and know that I am God: I will be exalted among the heathen, I will be exalted in the earth. The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. (Psalms 46: 8–10)

“Exalted in the earth”: the ground state of being on Earth as opposed to the mechanical state of being a nation at war. “Exalted” suggests a Greek verb, *timao*, which is the first part of one of the author’s first name: it means *to value*, but not always “to set a price on”. Things have a price because one values them. One does so because one can become still, arriving at one’s ground state and really “knowing”. “Be still, and . . .”: time is involved. Mercy might not happen. One must wait for it to see whether the hammer will fall or not. When the hammer is still, then one can know it is mercy.

One can hardly hear that merciful sound in the dark Satanic mill of incessant physical and chemical forces exacting their revenge on one another, that incestuous mouth of wailing and gnashing of teeth, the churning of Schopenhauer’s will eating itself (for example), where bigger and more long-lasting things destroy smaller and more fragile things, where the future is foreclosed by the past, where children are eaten alive. Jesus talks this way in the books of Matthew and Luke about what might happen if one misses the mark.

The fundamental particle of mercy is silliness, insofar as revenge hesitates, forgets what it is about, is stunned by the heft of its own blind stupidity: “Just why are we fighting, again?” The returned hammer blow suddenly looks . . . silly. What is special about a “talent” is that it is not a marker of anything special at all: it is a profoundly silly thing, like a bucket for bailing out a becalmed ship; it just happens to be “there”.

What the Ancient Mariner enacts by not-speaking the beauty of the snakes is prayer at its purest: an ineffability that is the basic substance of worship. It is not an utterance or a contrivance but the very unfolding of a creature’s being, this creatureliness itself being also the “silly” abject not-quite-expression of a fact about the universe.

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