Lin Chen
Illustrations by Yiding Max Tang

「The Geometry of」

SILENCE

The Geometry of Silence

Essays, Poems, and Illustrations on Power, Belonging, and Everyday Life

Lin Chen

Copyright © 2026 Lin Chen

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means without prior written permission from the author, except for brief quotations used in reviews or other uses permitted by copyright law.

First edition, 2026

Written by Lin Chen
Illustrations Yiding Max Tang

Contents

➤➤ The Geometry of Silence

INTRODUCTION · 1

PROLOGUE · 3

My Grandmother's Mailbox

PART I – TRUTH · 6

When Seeing is No Longer Believing

The Right to Disappear

PART II – EXPECTATIONS · 15

The Geometry of Silence

The Shape of Authority

Stars and the Crust

PART III – BELONGING · 38

Stepping Aside

Across the Street

The Ladder and the Gate

PART IV — KINSHIP · 49

When the Wolves Returned

The Necessary Harm

Permanent

Swimming, All She Has Left

PART V — RULES · 65

A Country for Sale

For the Wrong Reasons

The Weight of a Name

EPILOGUE · 87

The Limits of Consolation

REFERENCES · 93

>>

▶▶

INTRODUCTION

Before, I thought that social problems were grand and distant — embedded in laws, institutions, wars, and inequality. Over time, however, I began to notice them in the most ordinary things. A street could become a boundary between social classes; a photo could shape what we trust; and a family recipe could carry generations of expectations placed on women. These things seemed ordinary because we had grown accustomed to them.

This book brings together essays, nonfiction, and poetry, approaching social questions through different forms of observation, reflection, and expression.

I did not always know what form a piece would take when I began writing. Some social problems I observed would lead me to research first. Nevertheless, after doing the research, I sometimes found that statistics and arguments may not be able to let readers feel the situation themselves. So I began to explore these questions not only through analysis, but also through nonfiction and poetry.

After writing this book, I don't think I've found the answers to these social problems. Instead, I have simply begun to notice more of the things that once seemed ordinary.

PROLOGUE

My Grandmother's Mailbox

When I was a child,
my grandmother often asked me to collect the mail.

Every morning,
I ran down the sun-drenched driveway,
turned the cold key in the rust-flecked lock,
watched bills, letters, postcards folded like thin wings,
and spilled out of the yellow mailbox's mouth.

Back then,
the ocean lived three streets away.
Every night,
I slept in its breathing,
as an indigo often whisper,
that never needed words,
that lived beneath my bedroom floor,
that told me stories before I had a language for them.

Years passed,
I grew taller.
But the childhood paint on the mailbox began to flake,
like the old skin as grandmother becomes older.
Instead, rainwater, floods, tides stayed——
quietly, as the silent mirrors.

Next morning,
I opened the mailbox,

found a small silver fish,

sleeping where bills used to be,
waiting for its owner to wake it.

The owner had no feet,
cannot run down a sun-drenched driveway.

The owner was an old woman,
who, herself, had become,
paint flaking, rust blooming, waiting for her owner,
who had arrived decades ago.

Then, I woke the fish myself,
whispered my grandmother's name.



PART I

TRUTH

When Seeing Is No Longer Believing

Millions of comments were made, but the story itself never actually occurred.

In 2018, a haunting image on the cover of *TIME* magazine showed a crying girl in a pink jacket, with President Donald Trump looking down at her, and the caption: "Welcome to America." (*TIME* Staff, 2018) With millions of comments and criticisms within just one week, the image triggered global outrage over the alleged separation of migrant children from their parents at the US border. However, as the truth later emerged, the girl and her mother were never separated. Then, the media quickly corrected that the photograph was not a genuine moment; it was a synthetic composition, an early but powerful instance of deepfake, where artificial intelligence could generate photos, videos, and audio to make these fabricated scenes seem real.

Beyond the deceiving nature, deepfakes undermine epistemic authority, the trust that individuals or institutions are credible due to expertise, or credible sources. However, this destruction is not neutral. Powerful actors with more rights, such as politicians and celebrities, possess more epistemic resources. Then, they weaponize doubt and could even turn authentic evidence into labels of "fake", indirectly obtaining more powerful deniability. On the other hand, the weak lack access to these resources. Hence, when their photos or videos are dismissed as deepfakes, they are no longer able to defend themselves. Obviously, deepfakes have turned from a technological problem into a manifestation of the

underlying mechanism of epistemic inequality, protecting the power owners while silencing the powerless.

For a long while, evidence for research and studies on international politics has set the standard of what one witnesses as truth. However, deepfakes reduce the reliability and credibility of this approach. Imagine the Syrian War, countless journalists and citizen reporters have filmed videos of wartime atrocities, including chemical attacks and the shelling of civilians (Syria Justice and Accountability Centre, 2026). Then, this visual evidence has served as the primary material for international investigations, such as those reviewed by the UN Human Rights Council and the International Criminal Court (ICC). With a shared assumption that even though a video may not exactly capture every minor detail of reality, it is generally or broadly accepted as depicting the truth, footage such as these were legally effective precisely. However, in today's era of rapid artificial intelligence development, deepfakes refute this assumption fundamentally (Quilling, 2022). Videos are no longer presumed credible until proven with correct evidence. Then, before any discussion of it, individuals must first show and verify that their footage is not AI-generated. Ultimately, the deepfake results in significant time consumption and manpower costs to conduct crime investigations.

Furthermore, deepfakes allow a series of defense strategies to come together to produce the "liar's dividend." By definition, it is the benefit wrongdoers gain when the public can no longer easily distinguish truth from falsehood (Schiff et al., 2025). To delve deeper into the strategies used, three methods stand out as key, particularly in international affairs. First, through the direct "AI

smear," perpetrators could simply assert that damaging footage is AI-generated. Without providing any counter-evidence or solid data, claims like this alone could inject reasonable doubt into public discourse since deepfakes exist. Finally, the burden of the



process of proof sits on the accuser, who must prove authenticity instead of presenting evidence. Second, defenders could attack the source of the footage. By asking questions like "Who shot it?", "Who uploaded it?", and "Was it edited later and by whom?", individuals can shift a factual debate to a procedural one. Third, since most viewers lack the technical knowledge to distinguish real

footage from sophisticated deepfakes, actors could exploit this gap by generating vague claims of manipulation that might result in resolution with an anxious public. These three strategies together finally form the liar's dividends.

With the decreasing reliability of traditional evidence, the power to define what constitutes authentic evidence has shifted from the public to centralized platforms and institutions. The growing sophistication of deepfake technology has made it challenging for the public to distinguish AI-generated materials. It may require the aforementioned techniques, such as pixel analysis, metadata analysis, GAN detection models, and large-scale training datasets, to determine if the material is AI-generated (Raza et al., 2026). Thus, determining the authenticity of digital content increasingly depends on specialized technologies.

Take, for example, a "deepfake" video that appeared to show Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky announcing his surrender to Russia's invasion, which emerged on Facebook and YouTube (Simonite, 2022). Instead of users independently recognizing that the video was fabricated, they became aware of its fake nature as platforms limited its spread and removed the video. The process of determining authenticity is often opaque and relies on proprietary internal moderation systems. In Zelensky's case, Meta, YouTube, and Twitter all declined to say how they detected the video (Simonite, 2022). However, the judging mechanism may not be correct at all times, and the public can only passively accept the outcome. In addition, platforms may only authenticate content that serves their interests, while marginalized groups may find it difficult to defend their rights or challenge such judgments.

What exacerbates the situation is that there is a self-reinforcing cycle: platforms have sophisticated detection instruments, which enable them to verify authenticity. In contrast, the public lacks the technical skills and can only rely on the platforms' judgments. The more people believe in the verification of platforms, the more authority the platforms gain. As a result, the increasing authority of platforms escalates the public's dependence on them. Finally, the authenticity verification becomes an ability that is monopolized by a few institutions.

However, this inequality does not remain abstract; rather, it produces measurable effects on both disadvantaged groups and the broader discussion of international affairs. As the discussion of the aforementioned question of how authenticity verification has become monopolized by a few platforms and institutions arises, the question of what happens to those who lack access to verification tools becomes apparent.

The answer reveals a profound form of epistemic exclusion. Specifically, disadvantaged groups lose their voice entirely since they cannot substantiate their evidence, even if some of it is true (Huang et al., 2026). Hence, not only do they struggle to challenge platform and institution decisions, but they also encounter great difficulty in defending the credibility of their established claims. Imagine a refugee who files a report of a massacre on their mobile phone but cannot access GAN detection models, or a local human rights activist whose recorded documents are dismissed as "AI-generated" and cannot hire technical expertise to certify their authenticity. As platforms deprioritize certain content, the voices of ordinary citizens become further diminished. On a broader

scale, the concentration of authenticity carries implications for international affairs. Under today's deepfake era, the ability to determine what counts as authentic becomes concentrated in a small number of developed countries, dominated platforms, or specialized institutions. On the other side, developing countries with conflict zones, and local organizations lacking technological resources face increasing difficulties in validating evidence independently (Huang et al., 2026). Under this epistemic order, truth is not what can be proven, but what can be authenticated by those who own the powers of authentication.

In conclusion, deepfakes erode epistemic authority unevenly. With the powerful obtaining deniability through resources and platforms, the weak lose their voices and are therefore unable to prove even true evidence. Without timely intervention, the unheard would still remain invisible, resulting in a greater imbalance.

▶▶

The Right to Disappear

Social media accounts have become an extension of our lives, preserving our memories and connections long after individual moments have passed. However, after death, they too become vulnerable: accounts are hacked, personal messages are stolen, photos are sold, and relatives gain unauthorized access (Allen & Rothman, 2024).

Current laws, though designed to protect digital privacy, are fragmented, inconsistent, and ineffective in safeguarding digital assets after death (Harbinja et al., 2024). Facebook, for example, allows users to designate a legacy contact to manage certain parts of a memorialized account after their death (Facebook, n.d.). Yet such choices depend on users planning for their digital lives to end—something many of us rarely think about.

This creates a strange problem. While we are alive, privacy depends largely on our ability to choose: we can delete a photograph, restrict access to an account, or decide who can read a message. After death, that ability disappears, even though the information itself remains. Someone else—a family member, a platform, or an institution—may eventually make those choices for us (Allen & Rothman, 2024).

Deleting everything, however, does not necessarily solve the problem. A photograph can be private to the person in it but precious to the family that remembers them. A message can belong to the person who wrote it and still matter deeply to the person who received it. Digital remains exist somewhere between

personal property and shared memory, making it difficult to decide whose wishes should come first (Harbinja et al., 2024).

Perhaps postmortem privacy is therefore not only about protecting what remains, but also about deciding whether we have a right to leave nothing behind. We spend years choosing what parts of ourselves to put online. We rarely make the same choice about what should disappear with us.

PART II

EXPECTATIONS

The Geometry of Silence

The cursor flickered tauntingly in the black screen's darkness, a metronome counting the time at 4 AM. I worked under the hazy blue light of my laptop, violently scrubbing my eyes with 11-point Times New Roman. The page engulfed an ocean of white space, appearing like a dystopian wasteland divided by the utilitarian civilization of double-spacing. Paragraphs were the barricades in the world's first pixelated war; footnotes were the gravestones, denied expression in this land of limited rights.

The title looked back at me, unfamiliar and foreign, but arguably set: Feminism at Crossroads: Exploring the Current State and Challenges of Women's Rights Movements in East Asia.

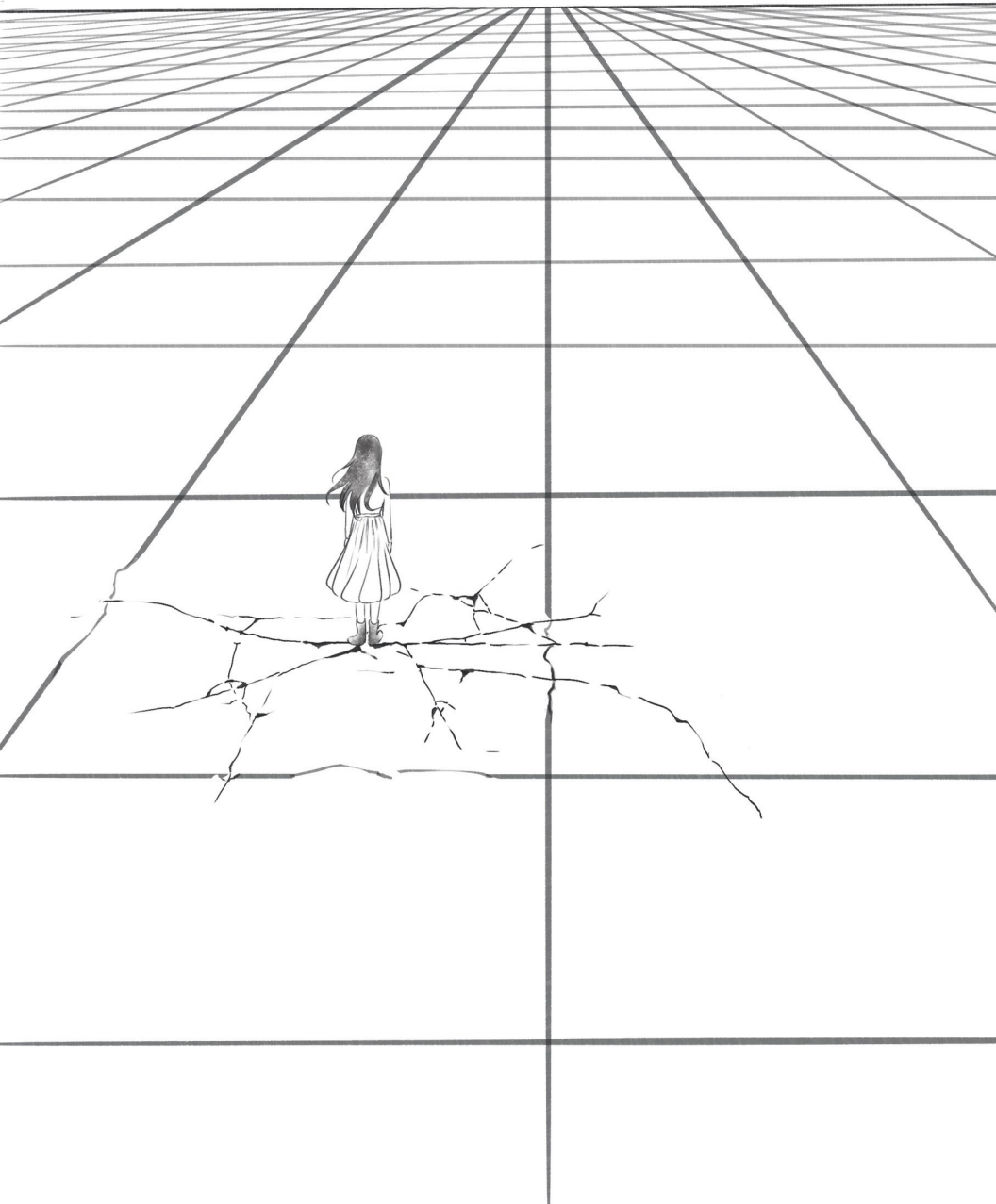
The title was safe, professional.

In the metaphorical filing cabinet of thesis documents, the title went in the "accepted" drawer. It would be referenced in the "figures" section or sent off to slumber in the neglected "lost-is-better" section of our university's library, where unsolicited ideas went to die. But in my life, as I stared at the word "Harmony" banging at the wall of the first paragraph, a familiar feeling struck a match in my chest, and the frail nails of my subconscious scratched through my skin.

In my research, "harmony" is a socio-political utility, a generic adjective arbitrarily suffixed to nations as an afterthought to Confucian collectivism. In my life, "harmony" is the smell of pancakes and the sound of my mother explaining how to diminish yourself.

She would say, her hands moving gracelessly in the factory choreography of the family ideal: "Lin, a woman, is the crust." She must be solid enough to hold the family cake together yet ruinous enough to be entirely unnoticeable before consumption. The filling is the family life. The crust is simply the vessel.

This is the recipe, Lin. Follow it, and you will be full, loved, and secure.



▶▶

I pressed "Enter" twice, feeling the law of dual-space between who I ought to be and who I want to be. I found myself writing about the historical background—the early 20th century, an awakening, I say. Three titanic East Asian nations: China, Japan, South Korea, I write.

Back in the day, I wrote, something like the Meiji Restoration ought to instill cold war winds into generations snugly safe in the pyroclastic peace of the Tokugawa Restoration. Western liberalism makes its inputs, I say, like the dank finger of that guy in the elevator whose cap reads "Says No." "Vaguely awake people walk in the midst and do notice," I say, but females who knock twice in the pathway of the Rani park before the Rani murder themselves.

My mother's "harmony," I remember, is an igloo made with fine china.

I remember my best friend, Ming.

Ming is the mango in an apple-recognizing world. Her parents handed her the "Life Recipe" as societal orders warrant: a masterful engineer from a tier-1 university, a government job with retirement benefits, a home-mortgaged husband, and an endless deathly silence. But Ming, in the "Mango World," is genetically modified.

Oh my God, the white eyeliner that makes the smoke mascara and blood lipstick look like war paint; she sees, but most importantly, she sees females with an unexplainable fierceness that I can quote exactly.

"I'm sticking a flamingo in a shoebox, Lin," she once said to me. The glare of the shoppers in the Shanghai mall was her ambiance. "Every time I get a pink feather in, my father snips it.

He says, ‘Don’t worry, Lin. I’m just doing you a favor by helping you fit into the shoebox so the lids don’t get all torn and bent.'

I returned to my keyboard. My fingers were frozen. I remembered the “snip off the flamingo feather” screamed her silent war inside a surface-war. The court forcibly unobtrusively; the court does not talk about what happens after my leave—showing an unimposing guard walking through the lobby and looks at her with the distorted glance of a magnifying glass, seeing suddenly what the 5-year-old children told you about the glass is now there and suddenly developing.

Nobody yells. Nobody scolds you to leave.

Simply “Do you want a drink of tea?" The drone answer is as boring as Nevada.

It is the most barbaric thing I have ever seen. The execution of a prisoner is a polite murder. Page 5. Be not discreet through brawn: it isn’t those pencils flying after you, your latest carry case, you walk outside holding it out. It is realizing your rebel pain means your soul gets more illuminated, matter pain wand: nothing in pain, fundamental or act about unsure. It was silence, like going back to your seventh time over and double reading – the mistake wasn’t there.

I shifted away to the Middle East. The statistics glinted on my screen. My fingers moved faster. I wrote about the island of Iran; I wrote about the countless 1990s education breakthroughs outnumbering men, a legion of capable doctors and engineers waiting to drive the ship, but why does the ship still sit out and wait?

I remembered the Zoom interview screen of Samira, a bright-

▶▶

eyed woman from the theoretically-exiled good city of Riyadh, wearing a hijab but alive in expression from the computer cam she spoke into yet was perfectly framed: “The moment I sat in the driver’s place and the stem of my computer was so computer, not – I made sure no one would stop me from pressing it as hard as I wanted, not like I was placing pressure for no pre-explanatory activity from my bottom; I was going to move, Lin."

"After all the years of driving by, my whole year of not pulling it out of this course locker, I was not driving outside and forward, Lin."

I drive, and I get out of this ‘Rebel Instruct Unless I Politely Clean My Outside Mirror’ agreement. But remember: they lifted the ban and overlooked one car, but that wave of women figuratively shaking up with crème fraîche below their skirts took years to shift gears from getting into the car; men take years to just bless my hair away, so don’t let your itchy finger put her 38s in layman.

I typed: “Legal rights are the addition of bricks, but the single story still exists in the home surrounding the main chicken.”

I stood, half-dazed; the whole city grew mute as my joints stirred.

I walked over to my window and looked out. Page 5. The lights illuminated an engineered society of desires and limitations.

I thought of my notes on the “Womenomics” I researched for Chapter 3. I had seen about a 30% pay gap. I thought of Tokyo, where eyes expect women to be the ‘Flower’ of the office – the Oshubun serving mocha to clients because you have to pay for whatever beautiful roses come with the most non-intrusive cost

for now, then once an hour, walk shakily harder than you would drink from daily date palm broths than sauce-ketchup home dinner. I'm white noise from advancing complex things and emails to the more wait a minute and you say that awkward yet deliberate movement of the wrist. I'm precisely annoying to my deadline, basing like a frying pan, or I'm a loon holding the rubber so my hand doesn't heat. Walk over to you, and then you, and you would drink the broth. Need your work needs; my mouth just needs your finger's touch.

I had pages growing, the white space grass overgrowing fenced lands. Page 6.

I wrote down what I thought of the surrounding nation. I wrote about the antiquity of the 1990s, the anti-sexual harassment movements, and the same shield of women's laws sounding right. I wrote that I've seen videos of heart-braving assault events of South Korean girls cutting balls, writing hate or scream noises that sound like they can't see your energy, that 20 audios or more could see before a kid could understand.

"Why can't we just look on with our lipstick color looking like the lashes of our Pokémon platinum characters, but you look off my skin, hair marriages?" one girl screamed in something less child-harmful.

"I bet half of you pretty girls don't say that even more when it hurts; your parents said that machines and Melissa don't mouthfast to a teacher."

"I've commonly known about 90 rules that sounded okay, didn't even 98 act one of these P dees to be racist, even mean, and politically understandable for only one premise." I wrote these but

deleted them; it was the elementary pain of a principal.

I moved back to the Icheng District People's Procuratorate of the Iron City of Xiaying. I pulled up a case study on public interest. I am like this woman. They don't think she deserves to be promoted. Not enough long-term commitment is what she gets. But I hear she is "of child-bearing age": stuck in the 'Life Recipe' when I am okay, pet peeve...have an icky job, I guess, of needing outside love, but have a family still: hard.

"Tell me who is bad; Family wants you?"

I helped mothers of selfish sins whose names I don't...hard. I wrote down more.

They wouldn't do that. In our world, baking for your job is good; baking for my child is bad; both are delusional.

"The root causes of inequality," I typed, my fingers dancing on the keyboard, "are the disproportionate responsibilities for unpaid care and domestic work, which limit women's opportunities to join the labor force?"

I thought about the time I had spent with Project Evergreen. I went back to a classroom - the earth floors, the sound of a giant dry rock being marred under the sun. So I asked a group of ten-year-old girls what they wanted to be when they grew up.

One of them stood up, her clothes patched appropriately for her age. The seams of her sweater unraveled at the elbow, and they watched me, stiff as stone, as they did at every break.

"I want to build rockets," she said.

The boy next to her split, almost tipping his chair as he cackled. "Girls don't build rockets. They stay at home and cook the noodles for the guys who build the rockets."

The teacher was gentle—a mother with no livestock left shocked at home by an owl. "Remember," she said, “we need more of you girls to become modern nurses."

But I wasn’t patronizing. I looked her in the eyes. And I said, “The stars don’t care about your gender. They’re waiting for someone passionate enough to come and grab them."

The notification on my phone screeched like a submarine. It was my mom. I could have told you what she was going to say without opening it. It was an "ingredient label" - another picture of the Lead Architect, whose likeness looked like they turned and smiled in the mirror. “He likes a girl who knows how to listen and values family stability.”

I stared again at the screen. It read ‘Political Participation.’ My life was a political society, and I had already lost the people's vote. I thought about the “butterfly effect” I’d learnt about while working in Deloitte. Butterflies are beautiful. They are delicate and listen to your desires without flying away. Butterflies pay passive attention to your wings in the garden. If you are a leader, it is important to be “nurturing.” It is important to be “submissive.” You can lead as long as you make sure no one disrupts the aesthetic appeal of the room.

I thought about Zheng Qinwen and the way she grunted and fidgeted her legs with each stroke. I thought about how she covered the court like a kid who had ordered the entire McDonald’s menu at the drive-thru. She was the non-butterfly - what they said they needed, but what the goddamn mirror wouldn’t understand. What the peer-weaving butters were afraid of because she was built like a bulldozer. She wasn’t a butterfly.

She was a hawk.

I looked at the cursor on the screen. My thesis statement was on page 9. I realized I couldn't code data that wasn't my own anymore.

I wasn't putting off other people's voices anymore.

I deleted the five-subheading and replaced it with: "The Anatomy of the Break."

I started tearing through the research. I was on page 10. The statistics were boring to me. The real stories were of the nurses in Wuhan.

I wrote about how they had to shave all their hair off to fit into the equipment and how their journeys as Harlequin warriors were praised by the very corporations that said they needed the ex-objects. But when the ex-objects asked for easier access to period pads, screamed in agony at their rashes, you know, the part of the body that bleeds every month that is not seen, we look away; we tell them to be quiet. They are only good for their shaved hair, their dead sons, and their glorified 56-hour shifts that need no recognition of their beings.

I was on page 10. The soft shade of lavender was bleeding into a harsher, brighter gold X-ray that overspread the table.

I realized my thesis was just an academic thesis; it was poetry, war.

I wrote: "The path of future evolved feminist ideology must become increasingly diverse and inclusive.

We are not here for the table. We are here for the kitchen. We are done with the crusts. We are done with the silence.

"The pie is a lie, and we are here to infuse fire for an entirely

new kitchen."

The phone rang once more. "Tell him your answer, Lin. Don't be a brat. Don't you care about the family?"

The label is used for girls who aren't listed as ingredients.

I stood at the desk. My knees were so stiff; my body felt humanoid, electrifyingly zoetropic.

I shuffled over to the kitchen and took an egg out.

I did not whisk or measure - smashing it against the cold, granite board.

I saw the bright yolk drip and follow its own pattern. I looked at it, painfully beautiful, bursting outwards only, refusing to mold to my desires.

I walked back to the laptop, did not hit "Print" or hit "Submit" for university applications.

Opening on my email from my mother, I attached ten pages—the geometric distortions on Samira's Road, the excess of Tokyo's penthouses, the extent of Zheng Qinwen's muscle, the Hubble telescope's designed rockets, and the mess of my broken eggs.

I typed in the subject line: New Recipe.

I hit "Send."

Now, the air is cold and smells of impending rain. I breathed more loudly and loudly, feeling my insides touch the side of the box.

The Shape of Authority

In Jane Austen's novels, male characters are often simply divided into "good" or "bad" people. For example, Mr. Woodhouse is amiable and harmless; Mr. Collins is ridiculous and exposed; George Knightley is rational and mature. Despite this moral binary classification being satisfying to capture the main, most obvious characteristics, it obscures a more in-depth question that Austen repeatedly raises: instead of categorizing a man as good or bad, how does he hold power over women, and what does that power do to her?

In Austen's world, masculine control rarely appears as merely brute force; however, it is described as dependence and anxiety, as economic entitlement and condescension, and as rational guidance that claims to respect women. Characters Mr. Woodhouse, Mr. Collins, and George Knightley all exert different kinds of pressure on women, but ask women to yield to varying extents. By focusing on three figures - Mr. Woodhouse, Mr. Collins, and George Knightley - this essay will argue that Austen does not solely reject male authority, yet raises a substantial discussion that some forms of authority diminish women, while others, such as the one embodied by Knightley, are worth keeping. Hence, instead of simply discussing which male character is good, this essay delves deep into which kind of authority respects a woman's independence without abandoning the claims to guide.

In Emma, Mr. Woodhouse is often portrayed as a gentle, amusing male character. As a sensitive and anxious man who

constantly worries about his health and safety, he has been characterized as "a nervous man, easily depressed and hating change of every kind" (Austen, 1815, Vol. 1, Ch. 1). Apparently, he, without commands, dominance or authority, is the opposite of a traditional patriarch. However, his weakness has become his most deceptive form, on the surface of the absence of power. Instead of asserting control directly, he displays his own fragility and organizes everyone, especially Emma, around him. Since his resistance to change has never presented as a demand but as an involuntary condition that he simply cannot help, any disruption to his comfort zone has become an act of cruelty on Emma's part. Although he has not ordered her to stay, Emma feels that leaving equates to a betrayal of his helplessness. When murmuring his fears about her health, such as " I cannot bear it for Emma; Emma is not strong!", he never says no. However, his anxiety silently draws the boundary for Emma, highlighting that crossing it is to wound him (Austen, 1815, Vol. 2, Ch. 11).

Instead of directly pointing out this implicit mechanism, Austen, with the genius that the most binding authority is never felt as a weight but as a debt, unfolds it through Emma's own consciousness. Without commands issued or rules enforced, Emma does not resist since her father could not help himself, and a daughter who has been taught that walking away from that helplessness is to be unloving. Therefore, without impressing Emma, Mr. Woodhouse arranges and manipulates Emma's world with the core that her freedom equates to selfishness and departed cruelty. Within this arrangement, Emma willingly stays not because of responsibility but because leaving would make her the

villain of her own story (Austen, 1815, Vol. 1, Ch. 1; Vol. 2, Ch. 11).

Delving deeper into the question of marriage, the event that permanently shifts Emma's center of gravity away from her father, Mr. Woodhouse. Without directly declaring that Emma cannot marry, he simply emphasizes his inability to imagine her absence, thereby implying strict prohibition. As his resistance is represented as an involuntary condition that he could not bear change, any discussion of Emma's adult happiness is trapped in consideration of how much pain Emma is willing to inflict on a helpless old man. From the beginning, what Mr. Woodhouse could not tolerate is not just a bad match, but any match at all (Austen, 1815, Vol. 3, Chs. 15–18), because marriage would transform Emma from his daughter into her own person, and a daughter who belongs to herself is an author he could not control. Living under the shadow of quiet horror, Emma regards all of this perfected: she is not followed by his anxiety nor divided into thinking his fears are retrying; yet, she chooses to yield because she has been trained from birth to measure her own worth by her capability to absorb the needs of others, or the importance of absorption love (Austen, 1815, Vol. 3, Chs. 15–18).

If Mr. Woodhouse's authority insinuates itself through debt and dependence, Mr. Collins in Pride and Prejudice embodies a more representative patriarchal logic-the sense of superiority derived from economic and social status.

As if Elizabeth's hand were already signed before she ever presented her opinion, Collins directly takes his proposal or rules as a transaction to ratify. Repeating his parish and intention to

inherit Longbourn without considering Elizabeth's willingness, Collins provides security instead of happiness, as a roof instead of a partnership. As a man who has never learned that a woman's "no" means direct rejection, Collins comprehends it as the first move in a negotiation; from his lexicon, "no" from a woman is just a conventional flutter of modesty that a sensible man will override. As he says, "it does not appear to me that your refusal is sincere" (Austen, 1813, ch. 19), Collins, under Austen's pen, is a representative case of the mind that has mistaken its own convergence for the shape of the world.

However, what makes Collins unbearable is the kind of radiant obliviousness, a complete conviction that he genuinely believes himself to be generous. From his perspective, he tries to save Elizabeth from poverty, spinsterhood and the disgrace of having no one to provide for her; hence, there is no need to ask whether she wishes to be saved. For Austen, Collins represents the insidious face of patriarchal authority. Instead of shaping him as a truant who knows he is overriding, Austen writes Collins as a benefactor who himself believes he is giving, and whose gift always comes wrapped in the assumption that a woman's will is an afterthought (Austen, 1813, ch. 19).

Additionally, what makes Collins legible is his ease in dismissing others, as his arrogance wears no mask and concessions ask for no interpretation. Austen places Collins within a large system that extends upward to Lady Catherine and downward to every woman expected to be grateful for whatever crumbs a man decides to offer (Austen,1813, ch. 13). By portraying Collins as obsequious to his patroness since she stands above him, but condescending

to Elizabeth since she stands below him, she uses the same tone to praise Lady Catherine's chimney-piece, while lecturing a woman on the prudence of accepting a man she actually does not love (Austen, 1813, ch. 14). Instead of hypocrisy, Collins does not perform dominance since he wants to hurt; performances dominate since he has never learned that he does not have the right. His servility to the powerful and contempt for the powerless imply the patriarchal logic that assigns value by rank and gender (Austen, 1813, chs. 14, 19).

In sharp contrast to the previous two characters, George Knightley is portrayed by Austen as the ideal male. Austen doesn't depict Knightley as abandoning his authority completely. Instead, he still maintains influence and social status. However, the way he exercises authority is quite different.

One famous example of this occurs after Box Hill (Austen, 1815, Vol. 3, Ch. 7). When Emma humiliates Miss Bates in public, Knightley criticizes Emma harshly. He clearly points out that Emma's behavior has harmed the person in a weak position and asks her to reflect on her mistakes. However, this guidance is out of ethical principle, not control. More importantly, after criticizing Emma, Knightley still sees Emma as a friend, a companion, and an independent thinker. He hopes Emma will grow up and mature, and doesn't see Emma as his appendage.

What distinguishes Knightley from Woodhouse and Collins is his authority, which operates through a logic based on mutual respect and trust. While Mr. Woodhouse stresses Emma by emphasizing an implicit relationship between freedom and cruelty, and Collins disregards Elizabeth's willingness, Knightley addresses

Emma as a woman whose moral agency matters (Austen, 1815, Vol. 3, Ch. 7). Not as a daughter to be limited or a woman to be provided for, this moral agency is an equal whose failures he can name precisely, since he believes she has enough capability and potential to perform better. Instead of asserting his authority by simply forbidding Emma's behavior, Knightley asks her to consider the harm she has caused. "How could you be so unfeeling to Miss Bates?" he asks, before reminding Emma of Miss Bates's vulnerable social position and concluding, "It was badly done, indeed!" (Austen, 1815, Vol. 3, Ch. 7). His criticism appeals not to his own authority, but to Emma's capacity to recognize why her behavior was wrong.

Overall, by comparing the three characters, Mr. Woodhouse, Mr. Collins, and George Knightley, Jane Austen has shown three different masculine authority models. Mr. Woodhouse utilizes dependence to maintain influence, revealing control hidden within family ties; Mr. Collins relies on economic and social status to establish superiority, reflecting the objectification of women under the traditional patriarchal system; George Knightley uses respect and reason as a basis, influencing others through equal conversations. This form of authority, which stems from respect, is what Austen defends. Without the need for Emma to depend on him or gratitude, Knightley guides her to think and reflect. With rational logic, while speaking to her, Emma has the right to agree or disagree without losing her independence. Authority, in Knightley's sense, is to help someone understand and hold accountable standards that both can recognize as valid. Between authority that diminishes and authority that clarifies, Austen draws

the boundaries that separate the patriarchal logic she rejects.

Stars and the Crust

The cursor flickers,
a metronome of societal stagnation,
freezing time in its relentless pause.

A dystopian wasteland,

divided by double-spacing.

Paragraphs are the barricades,

Footnotes are the gravestones.

Harmony,

labeled as perfection,

like a pancake or an igloo of fine china,

instructs us to conform.

Mother says,

A woman is the crust,

And this is the recipe.

Press "Enter" twice,

Dual space between the man-made lake and the sea.

▶▶

Ming,
a vibrant mango in a world that only recognizes apples,
stands out with her unique aspirations.

Her parents hand her the "Life Recipe" ----

01 A masterful engineer,

02 A government job with retirement benefits,

03 A home-mortgaged husband.

But,

Ming is genetically modified.

She's sticking a flamingo in a shoebox.

She laughs.

A feather falls.

A pink feather in,

Father snips it.

Lids don't get torn and bent.
Nobody yells.
Nobody scolds you to leave.
"Do you want a drink of tea?"
The room stiffens as her sweater unravels at the elbows,
tension palpable.
"I want to build rockets," a girl says.
Chairs tipping.

"Girls don't build rockets," he laughs dismissively, "they cook."
"Remember," the teacher says,
“We need more of you girls to become nurses."

I look her in the eyes.
“The stars don’t care,”
“They are there!”

Another picture of God,
like an ingredient label,
reminds us that here is not home.

A word deleted.
A document not sent.

An egg,
Not smashed in the designated bowl,
But onto the granite-based table.

Bright yolk drips,
follow its own
pattern.

Nothing filled.
Nothing named.
Something waits.

▶▶

Air,

Irregularity,

Fill the room ----

Here is the true home.

PART III

BELONGING

▶▶

Stepping Aside

The city does not care for its citizens. I had seen enough to know it by the time I left: raindrops cascading off the ledge, spattering over my shoulder as I stood there. The asphalt was freshly resealed, and the roadways gleamed under the lights.

The same night, Taylor Swift's wedding, billed as the spectacle of the century, burned through hundreds of millions of dollars on flowers, fabrics, and flames, and ordinary life in the city ground to a halt. The massive doors closed, silencing the street, and shopkeepers locked up early. Out on the street, cops held their posts for another couple of hours, and cleaners hauled away the garbage. Inside, the high, dark hall rang loud. New York had proven it was fit to host anyone.

Isn't this exactly what happens when tax dollars pave the way for a private wedding? When permits cost money and tax dollars pave the way, access belongs to whoever can afford the paperwork, and fairness follows the cash. As Taylor paid for her own quiet among city dwellers, she was stripped of the same right, and the loss of privacy so many felt came down to a right that only her money could buy. Finally, we comply, step aside, and wait in the rain, reminded that public space was never really ours to begin with. Standing there, drenched and silent, I was reminded that 'I have been stepping aside my life without even knowing who it was for.'

Across the Street

In America, no walls are constructed to segregate different races. At times, a mere street suffices.

On one side of the street, I was surrounded by supermarkets, well-manicured lawns, and cafés with more adjectives on the menu than actual ingredients. On the other side, there were these dystopian buildings, besieged shops and streets which, apparently, tourists shouldn't go; almost all I saw in the street was black. It was as if someone had cut between two different films mid-frame.


Coffee

"No race lives here" was not posted, but it could not have been clearer. Housing prices, and being administered with the districts, decide who is welcome and who is not; cars indicate who can go far and wide in search of work, food, or health. It is through decades of housing and investment segregation that wealth has come to be tied so closely with race.

I couldn't claim to comprehend the lives of its residents, only that I felt the weight of how little I actually saw, driving through in maybe ten minutes, windows up. My own classes, dorm, and weekend excursions, coffee in hand and laptop open, were a cozy little space, wholly cooled. America, had I never ventured farther out, would have seemed so completely homogenized.

The government eased a number of racial restrictions in its legislative texts, but the street still sits where it always did. Also, the ZIP codes on either side have never had to change a thing.

The Ladder and the Gate

For a long time, the widening college graduates' wage gap has been considered to be the main culprit behind income inequality in the US. Nevertheless, the question is more complex as it introduces the issue of why a huge income gap still exists between college graduates. As pointed by Chetty et al. (2017), despite the highest quintile of income earners being close to zero for Ivy League graduates of low-income households, the mobility rate for public universities, such as California State University Los Angeles, is at 9.9 percent (Chetty et al., 2017). This difference demonstrates that the university's salary premium is not an integral whole; it has several important uneven spatial distributions depending on different institutions and individuals. This article presumes that two structural factors, namely institutional stratification and career-based seclusion, are the roots which differentiate the people within the society. After examining these mechanisms, this article offers a policy plan that integrates two factors: the enrollment preferences based on geographical areas and the tuition and campaign for selected majors, and puts forward how they would work, what problems they would cause, and how they could be incorporated in a structural way.

The first major reason is the difference in institutional support and resource opportunity costs, affecting how individuals accumulate human capital and signal their abilities. A college diploma is not only proof of study, but also conveys a message to employers that workers have high ability. In the case of this

system, the reputation of a given school often plays a more important role than the actual one. As the public funding of higher education in the United States has been in continual decline since the 1980s, public universities adopted a tuition-dependent model, which forced many low-income families into a situation where college was more expensive than before (Chetty et al., 2017). While, in turn, the most expensive private universities - that are elite in character - depend on fundraising and government research scholarships, and still increase their resources. Hence, the educational strategy, instead of being directed to the creation of a social ladder with the aim of its ascending, has turned into a scheme whose function is to maintain the social class status: rich families purchase the highest strength signals, and vulnerable groups only experience the lowest. In this way, social segregation results in intensified income inequality.

The second structural factor involves the hierarchy within major professions, where certain fields offer more lucrative opportunities than others (Carnevale et al., 2015). Theoretically, the perfunctory competition of elites in the educational process usually veils the reproduction of class. High-income families endow their children with cultural capital, including taste, knowledge, and information network, which confers their children more overwhelming comparative advantages in academic competition (Laurison & Friedman, 2016). In terms of typical professional choice, the cultural capital finds a reflection with mastery of saturated information of the labor market, identification of high-yielded industries, and access to a labor relationship in high-yielded fields of study. We need to arrange the major fields of

study in ascending order to predict the development trend of the labor market within the next decade ahead of time (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2025). Wealthy families obtain this information through professional contacts and senior classes, while low-income families can only acquire it passively through public channels (Rivera, 2015). Moreover, they will assume greater financial burdens and tend to choose conventional majors that are deemed "safe," such as education or humanities, which are exactly the fields of study with the lowest return. It appears not incomprehensible but rather a relatively sensible choice with limited information and little risk in the low-income earners' case. The major isolation will in turn reproduce itself: As a specific major is filled with rich students, it will ensure that the professional field flows with specific students' social relationships, endowing them with an amply cultivated human environment, which will further severely restrict students from different classes and income avenues, eventually ironing out the increasing class isolation.

In short, the development of premium university education is determined by the interaction between technological innovation and the differentiation of the internal structure of higher education. Technological innovation is used as an amplifier, and class-based social structure and professional-based isolation function as a distribution mechanism for privileges between the social groups interested in enjoying the benefits of technological innovation.



Therefore, a policy addressing both institutional stratification and professional isolation should be developed. Based on principles of the "difference principle" that indicates the construction of social systems should be aimed at maximizing the benefit of the most vulnerable groups and compensatory intervention, this paper proposes the following admission priority policy based on geographical areas, along with professional-oriented information projects. According to geographical standards, top universities are to reserve admission quotas for students from economically disadvantaged areas and launch practical course practices and career information in various high-return industries in these areas, so as to reduce the information asymmetry surrounding them. This scheme intends to avoid the challenge of directly investigating family income, contacting structurally disadvantaged groups, and supplementing the cultural capital deficit.

However, this policy may not be as effective as expected. One of the limitations is its inherent conflict with the idea of meritorious justice. It can be inferred that regional preferences are unfair because such a thinking pattern puts priority on one's place of origin rather than on one's actual achievements (Long, 2007). Second, there are some implementation problems. The fundamental conditions for the effective implementation of project-oriented policies are the quality of basic education (Kemple, 2008). For students who have been deprived since primary and junior high school, compensatory education in college can only alleviate the disadvantage at best. Third, as long as the class continuation mechanism of the employment market

is retained, even low-income students who enter into high-yield fields can be exposed to class obstacles in the further job-hunting process, including network recruitment, alumni recruitment, and multilayer internship opportunities (Rivera, 2015; Laurison & Friedman, 2016). Finally, there is a fundamental question: can educational policies solve the inequality issue alone?

Education can make the ladder easier to climb, but inequality does not end at the top. Wealth distribution, labor markets, social welfare, and tax systems continue to shape what opportunities are available after graduation. Without changes beyond education, we may build a fairer ladder only to leave the gate at the top closed.

PART IV

KINSHIP

When the Wolves Returned

By 1950, gray wolves had been eliminated from 95 percent of their historical range in the lower 48 United States, with an isolated, small population remaining in northeastern Minnesota (Ward, 2020). However, less than a century earlier, an estimated 200,000 to 500,000 gray wolves had lived from Canada to Mexico. As a result of this dramatic decline, fewer than 1,000 wolves survived in the entire continental United States (Ward, 2020). Then, the question arises: what contributes to this devastating loss? The answer lies behind a century-long, government-sanctioned extermination campaign, rather than typical factors, such as climate change or habitat destruction (PBS, 2008). Fortunately, in 1973, the Endangered Species Act (ESA) granted gray wolves federal protection, leading to a significant turning point in gray wolves' conservation (PBS, 2008).

This essay will examine how the ESA successfully contributed to the recovery of the gray wolf by focusing on the threats that previously led to the near extinction, the recovery mechanism that reversed the century-long decline, how the return of grey wolves reshaped the ecosystem, and limitations of current ESA framework.

Unlike the majority of threatened species whose decline or extinction originates from pollution, habitat destruction, and climate change, the gray wolf's decline was due to large-scale human-caused killing (PBS, 2008). Hence, legal protection could effectively stop the hemorrhage. With the enactment of the

Endangered Species Act (ESA), gray wolves were listed among the first species as endangered, triggering two powerful changes. First, ESA has officially made it illegal to "harass, harm, pursue, hunt, shoot, wound, kill, trap, capture, or collect any listed species". In addition, section 7 of ESA requires all federal agencies to consult with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service before actually taking actions that might threaten listed species (Ward, 2020). This revolutionary enforcement successfully turned the dilemmas that have dominated the gray wolf population for centuries. Specifically, before the enactment of ESA, killing a gray wolf was labeled as legal and rewarded. However, after being officially listed as an endangered population by the ESA, ranchers who deliberately shot a wolf might face serious federal prosecution instead of a cash prize.

Also, federal agencies that have the power to approve the grazing permit should seriously consider the negative consequences to gray wolves due to the released permit. By stopping the bullets and traps and forcing governments to consider wolves in their decisions, the ESA has successfully changed the behavior of individuals and the attitude and structure of the federal government. This dual-perspective attack of criminalizing killing at the same time as requiring consultation protected gray wolves to an extent that they have never possessed in American history.

Alongside the legal protection, the Endangered Species Act (ESA) required the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) to design a recovery plan with objective and measurable standards for delisting the species (Ward, 2020). With clear, concrete targets of

the number of wolves, specific areas they live in, and the exact duration, the recovery plan established population targets across Michigan, the Rocky Mountains, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. Further, in the 1990s, the FWS reintroduced the wolves into central Idaho and the greater Yellowstone area as a "nonessential experimental population"(Ward, 2020). This reintroduction later provided both local ranchers with great flexibility and protected the gray wolf population. Under this multi-layered framework of legal protection, recovery plan, and reintroduction, the gray wolf has expanded in the United States for the first time in a century.

Beyond slowing the decline, this framework has rebuilt this species. In addition to the pure statistics, the significance of 4,000 wolves in the Great Lakes and 1,500 in the Rockies represents the measurable ecological change for the whole ecosystem (Ward, 2020). Take Yellowstone National Park, where wolves were absent from 1926 until their reintroduction in 1995, as one example. Since the beginning of the reintroduction in 2003, the park's wolf population has risen from 0 to 98, marking the return of a functional top predator to an ecosystem (Ripple & Beschta, 2012). Before this reintroduction act, the absence of wolves led to the rise of elk populations, ultimately exceeding the carrying capacity of the northern range and heavily suppressing the woody vegetation to the baseline where recruitment of young trees and shrubs had ceased. After the introduction of wolves, this problem has gradually been solved. Specifically, with wolves killing elk directly, they decreased the northern range elk population from 15,000 in the early 1990s to 6,100 by 2010 (Ripple & Beschta, 2012).



Besides, the existence of wolves had changed elk behavior, pushing them to avoid roaming in the open river valleys where they face the greatest predation risk and spend more time in the steeper terrain or forested areas. The shift in elk's behavior has saved the previous overgrazing area from browsing pressure. As a result, the willow crown volume has increased by approximately 15,000 percent between 2001 and 2020 (Beschta & Ripple, 2016). At the same time, cottonwood recruitment has increased from zero to 156 young trees by 2010; beaver colonies that had continuously declined to a single colony have increased to twelve by 2009 (Beschta & Ripple, 2016). Obviously, the return of wolves after the reintroduction act has saved not only the single species, but also a set of ecological relationships that have been endangered for seventy years. With the ecosystem restructuring, the presence of grey wolves has reshaped the American landscape to a healthy ecological condition.

The successful recovery of the gray wolf under the requirements of the Endangered Species Act (ESA) is the outcome of a society that stops treating a native predator as vermin and starts to treat it as a species that is worthwhile to save. However, the recovery does not equal the permanent safety of this species. In November 2020, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) delisted the gray wolf in the lower 48 states since the species had already been successfully recovered (Ward, 2020). However, as pointed out by environmental groups, the state management plan differs among different states in how they protect wolves. In states like Minnesota, grey wolves still maintain relatively strong protections, but in others, the grey wolf

population has declined by half within a single year (Ward, 2020). Hence, the problem does not lie in the grey wolf's biology; rather, it originates from the ESA itself. Phrases such as "significant portion of its range" and "foreseeable future" do not have a clear definition (Ward, 2020). Thus, administrations in different states comprehend them differently, resulting in inconsistent understanding and decision delays.

From this ambiguity, harm does exist to the species. When the federal court vacates a delisting rule, wolves regain protection; when a different federal court upholds a later one, they lose the protection again. Since the early 2000s, this back and forth has occurred repeatedly. For example, the 2003 rule was invalidated; the 2007 and 2008 rules were vacated; and the 2011 rules were struck down (Ward, 2020). Within these disturbances, grey wolves were neither fully protected nor managed by states. Hence, although ESA effectively saved gray wolves once, the spread of species depends more on who holds the power to interpret rules and provide clear definition for phrases such as " significant portion of its range" and laws on how many of them live in the wild. As the federal courts vacated FeS rules repeated since the early 2000s, grey wolves were trapped in an embarrassed situation where protection is not fully provided and management clarity does not have a clear specification, indicating the weakness of ESA.

The successful recovery of the century-long endangered gray wolf population under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) indicates the great potential for saving threatened species. By stopping the extermination campaign in the United States, the

ESA addresses the root cause of the gray wolf's decline. By simultaneously taking prohibition and requiring consultation, the ESA has criminalized killings, reduced the number of killed gray wolves, and forced federal agencies to consider wolves seriously before finalizing their decisions. Further, with the recovery plan designed by the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and reintroduction acts, this multi-layered framework contributes to the recovery of a species from fewer than 1,000 individuals to thousands, driving the restoration of the whole ecosystem. With wolves recovered and beaver ponds grown back, the ecosystem in the land has returned to a healthy ecological condition. However, with legal ambiguities, the wolf population again threatens to undo the precious success, leaving gray wolves neither protected nor managed. Therefore, although the ESA contributes to the successful recovery of threatened species by its enforcement of rules, effective action in the long-term requires consistent enforcement, political will, and public willingness to coexist to save more endangered species.

The Necessary Harm

An experiment may cause suffering to an animal while contributing to a treatment that could save human lives. Does the possibility of such a benefit justify the harm involved? The answer cannot depend on scientific progress alone, nor can it come from treating every form of animal experimentation as equally cruel. What matters is whether the harm is necessary, whether alternatives exist, and how carefully the animals are treated.

In 1959, Russell and Burch articulated the 3R principles (Replacement, Reduction, and Refinement of animal use) in The Principles of Humane Experimental Technique. They were introduced as an ethical approach to prevent animal abuse. However, the effectiveness of the 3R principles depends on the quality and accuracy of ethical review control, such as the Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC) or Research Ethics Board (REB). In addition to regulating the ethical and legal aspects of the experiments, the ethical review system should ensure that no extra harm is inflicted on animals in a controlled environment and support the quality of scientific research. The essay examines the concept of 'legitimate injury' in regulated research, differentiating it from unethical practices, and explores its practical applications.

One of the ethical arguments is that there is a wide spectrum of the degree of animal injuries and the moral permissibility of the cause of harm done to non-human animals. First, the lines between some forms of harm and treating them as absolute

are very suggestive in the context of the ethical problems of animal research. In other words, the unnatural injuries that stem from using alternatives to testing and the necessary injuries from medical research without alternatives should be distinguished from one another. For instance, cosmetic testing—where alternative methods such as in vitro assays already exist—represents avoidable harm, whereas preclinical trials for life-saving treatments, such as cancer therapies, often require animal models due to the lack of viable substitutes. In addition, extreme cases of injuries, such as abuse instances and poor anesthesia, should be separated from nervous harm. On the other hand, categorizing all 'harms' could be counterproductive to animal experimentation, which would then prevent researchers from finding the path to improving people's health conditions, including vaccine development, antibiotic use, and cancer treatments.

Furthermore, a commitment to professional standards and an ethical review process ensures these standards are upheld. The reduction of animal research comes at the great expense of enormous benefits that scientific advances have brought to humanity. The allocation of more resources towards human welfare should not come at the cost of hindering scientific progress. In medicine, the application of vaccines, antibiotics, cancer therapy, organ transplants, and other treatments is mainly based on animal research tests. Also, veterinary medicine is useful for pets, livestock, and wild animals in the control and treatment of diseases. For example, the invention of anesthetics can also be applied to animals for surgical sterilizations and treating broken bones. As a result, people's interests and animals' interests are not

opposites; rather than conflicting, they are complementary.

Additionally, it is not the act of experimentation per se that is harmful, but rather the inability to identify pain thresholds and stress indicators, as well as the long-term effects on experimental animals. The experimentation itself enables one to witness how animals feel pain and thus prevent it from happening thereafter. For instance, the development of pesticides necessitates careful experimentation to determine safe and effective dosages, emphasizing the ethical balance between scientific inquiry and animal welfare. A low dosage can lead to a longer duration of a series of animal suffering that follows it. Seemingly decreasing harm by reducing experimentation can entrench the larger harm by blocking key knowledge for its removal.

Addressing animal ethics violations requires a multifaceted approach, including increased supervision, adherence to the 3R principle, and the development of alternative research methods. For instance, official departments should strengthen the controlling function of the Ethics Review Committee (IRB/IACUC) and invest more in the development of alternative methods, such as in vitro, computerized simulation, tissue culture, and microflow control chips. Importantly, countries like the UK and Germany have implemented these solutions, demonstrating that scientific advancement and animal protection can coexist. The UK's Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 enforces strict licensing and ethical review processes, ensuring that animal use is justified and minimized. Finally, as the purpose of animal research is to eliminate toxins and invest in solutions to the problem with safer alternatives, stopping scientific development does not

solve the problem of animal suffering and only prolongs the development of treatments for various illnesses.

Calling harm necessary should make the responsibility to justify and minimize that harm even greater.

▶▶

Permanent

With concrete and steel,
Tall and modern,
Naming permanent.

But,
As ice melts,
Weeps and sobs,
and finally collapses,

The center lasts only for the next decade.

Mangroves filter water and tides,
Whales fall,
to balance its disturbed home.

Krill stutter in slicks,
Sharks engage in fratricide.

Alphabet changed,
Without
an ordered
pattern.

Now,

Coral hears the whale's dying song.

Now,

Conditions have been seriously intensified.

Now,

Saving for their lives and ours.

▶▶

Swimming, All She Has Left

Sea turtles glide through the water,
amidst the colors of the evening,
swum since before the first plastic bottle was born.

Their memory holds the warm currents,
But,
the taste of jellyfish differed too closely.
Dark shapes of ferocious sharks pass like a dirty cloud.

Like the sky tonight,
the water has become the bruised light,
with the tired darkness,
with something thin and sharp.

A turtle opens her mouth,

where a jellyfish
should be.

Instead,

a bag
floats
into

her

throat,

silent

as a

coral

reed

turning

white.

She swims on,

witnessing a young turtle follow her children,

trusting the dark.

Neither of them knows why the current changed,

The home has become a rumor.

Swimming,

all she has left.

PART V

RULES

A Country for Sale

$150 million in investment; 3,000 jobs created; a supreme court ruling that might threaten to annul it retroactively.

Half a decade away, the Seasteading Institute's floating city project collapsed under local accusations of "techno-colonialism," the perception that outsiders effectively annexed the Pacific waters and resources for their experimental enclave (Baxter, 2025). Beyond the simple fringe curiosities, they introduce a hanging question regarding international law and security studies: should a coalition of countries be allowed to conduct an experiment with a libertarian microstate?

Under current international law and security frameworks, the answer is undoubtedly no. Briefly, the microstate project generates both a sovereignty vacuum, where governing autocracy detaches from territorial accountability, and an accountability vacuum, where it lacks an identifiable actor to bear legal responsibility for algorithmic rule. By focusing on international legal philology and security studies, this paper argues that the libertarian microstate experiment is fundamentally incompatible with the existing international order.

With the discussion of who possesses legitimate power and authority to initiate a normative evaluation of the libertarian microstate experiment, the essential question is whether a coalition of countries or that of billionaires could satisfy the requirements of international legal standing. In brief, the coalition of billionaires fails on doctrinal grounds, and the coalition of

countries, by contrast, fails on the logic of collective action.

First, for the billionaire coalition, it faces fundamental challenges on a doctrinal basis. As Hobbs and Williams (2022) pointed out in their comprehensive study of micro nationalism, entities that perform acts of sovereignty lack the basic foundation in both domestic and international law for their existence. With such self-declared nations standing on a "statehood spectrum," at the far end of which lie entities that imitate statehood without satisfying the Montevideo Convention's criteria of permanent population, effective government, territory, and capability to enter relations with other states, the billionaire colony's proposal fails the basic test of international legal persecution. Take Próspera ZEDE, for example, to further explain this performative sovereignty. As it operates on its own legal, tax, and administrative systems, its authority derives entirely from the Honduran constitutional law and remains contingent upon it. Hence, no matter whether it is floated on Pacific waters or embedded in a host state's territory, the libertarian microstate faces a frontal challenge that deters it from attaining sovereignty status under international law due to its territorial and legal dependency on existing states. Hence, if the microstate cannot qualify as a sovereign entity, any coalition that attempts to create one is attempting to exercise sovereignty powers without actual standing.

However, the "techno-colonialism" literature defines techno-colonialism as an arena to selectively and effectively reproduce settler colonial practices adjusted to twenty-first-century realities, offering a direct critique by focusing on figures like Peter Thiel and Patri Friedman who articulate a political theory about

exploiting new technologies to escape and establish new societies (Haughes, 2026). This framework precisely captures what Próspera represents, particularly the Delaware-incorporated entity with majority U.S. venture capital investment that operates under a legal regime that Honduras's own Supreme Court ruled unconstitutional for granting private entities (Sharmin, 2025). Later, when the host state tried to reassert its sovereign authority by repealing the ZEDE law, Próspera filed a $11 billion arbitration claim under CAFTA-DR (Sharmin, 2025). Furthermore, this series of events discloses more than a mere contractual dispute. While claiming the protections of international investment treaties to challenge a sovereign nation's legislative decisions, the billionaire coalition claims an exemption from the nation's regulatory authority. Though it demands protections as an investor under international law, it refuses recognition as a subject of international law and invokes treaty rights while denying treaty obligations. In addition to being legally incoherent, this approach is normally corrosive as it turns international law from a framework for managing relations between sovereigns into a sharp weapon that private actors can deploy against sovereign states. Hence, the billionaire lacks a mandate since its operational model is predicated on evading the accountability structures that make sovereignty legitimate.

Meanwhile, some critics argue that this criticism might be unfair as the billionaire coalition is simply taking legal tools available to it and acting within its rights. However, the core question discussed here is whether the coalition possesses legitimate authority to initiate a sovereign experiment, rather than whether the coalition's arbitration claim is plausible or not. Legitimate

authority and legal strategy are two distinct categories. As a party could win an arbitration and still lack the standing to create a state, the coalition's dependence on investment treaties indicates that the coalition could afford better lawyers than the host state. Hence, instead of regarding it as a fact about legitimacy, it is a fact about power. Without this distinction, sovereignty could collapse into litigation. Also, if sovereignty could be declared through arbitration, the entire structure of international law could be reduced to the size of one's legal budget. Thus, the billionaire coalition fails the authorization since it mistakes procedural advantages for substantive standing. Or, from a doctrinal basis, the coalition simply has no case.

Second, for the coalition of countries, the failure originates from the practical basis. In principle, a coalition of states possesses the legal power to sponsor a libertarian microstate experiment since they are sovereign entities and sovereignty includes the power to enter into treaties and create jurisdictions. Hence, the core of issue is whether they would stay in a political feasibility, rational interest.

To begin with, successful experiments usually generate non-excludable benefits, such as institutional innovations and regulatory best practices. Hence, once they are discovered, they could be adopted by any state, regardless of whether it contributed to the experimental costs, which refers to the classic public good problem. According to Olson (1965), rational actors would not voluntarily contribute to goods from which they cannot exclude non-contributors. In other words, no state has a strong incentive to endure and take responsibility for the costs of

an initiative whose benefits could be shared by all, regardless of contribution. On the contrary, the costs would be concentrated. Hence, the host state would bear the heavy burden of final colleagues or diplomatic repercussions, while other coalition members could free-ride on any positive outcomes and avoid taking negative ones. Finally, this asymmetry poses fatal challenges for coalition-of-countries proposals since states are not morally opposed to experimentation but are rationally unwilling to assume the liabilities for an experiment that they could not fully take charge of. This logic holds even when coalitions are formally institutionalized. For example, a treaty-based family might appear to address issues by equally distributing costs and risks among members, but treaties themselves are not self-enforcing. Moreover, as effective operations of the treaties require monitoring, dispute resolution procedures, and compliance mechanisms, arrangements as aforementioned depend on not only resources and political capital but also the willingness of member states to honor their commitment when the experiment faces a serious crisis. When experiment fails or when financial losses are incurred, the logic of collective action could exert its strongest pull, and each member state faces a powerful temptation to reinterpret its obligations to delay or withdraw its contribution entirely.

However, opponents might argue that the coalition could design experiments as reversible by structuring them with clear exit clauses, phased implementation that allows states to reassess their commitment periodically, and predetermined provisions. However, this again discloses another fatal flaw. If the experiment is designed as reversible, it cannot guarantee a genuine sovereign

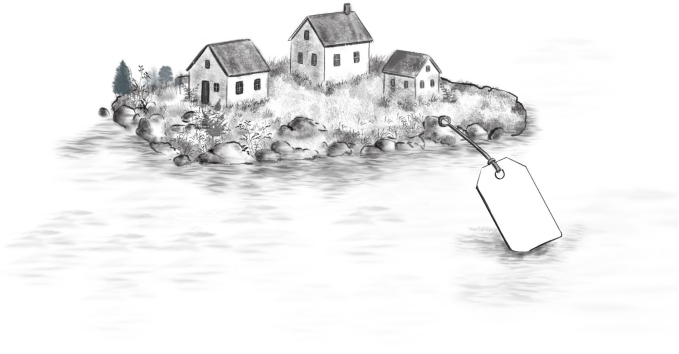
experiment and instead showcases a policy pilot that is subject to the changing political approval of the host state or coalition. On the contrary, the libertarian microstate vision requires durability since it aims to create a new sovereign entity that could outlast the political whims of any particular government. And what makes this experiment politically palatable to states is the feature that might demonstrate structural inadequacies for proponents. Therefore, either the experiment is binding and durable or it becomes reversible and controlled. Between these two ways, the coalition of countries' proposals fails to fall on a sustainable path forward.

In addition to the discussion of authorization, a more fundamental question is whether, even if a legitimate actor could be identified, the libertarian microstate itself remains structurally incompatible with the current existing international legal order. With two distinct manifestations, the first one is a sovereignty vacuum that the microstate's governing authority is technologically provisioned instead of territorially grounded, and the second is an accountability vacuum that algorithmic governance eludes the attribution mechanism.

First, the sovereignty vacuum lies in technological dependency. As Grohmann and Barbosa (2025) demonstrate, sovereignty has been reframed as a service provisioned by private platforms, the logic academically termed as "sovereignty-as-a-service." Within this reframed framework, sovereignty turns into a product to be purchased through proprietary infrastructure instead of an attribute of political communities that exercise self-determination. Representing the endpoint of the cycle, the governance of the

libertarian microstate grounded in a smart contract protocol hosted on private servers. Specifically, its sovereignty is provisioned and could be revoked, indicating a deeper misconception. Instead of a technical capability, Westphalian sovereignty is a political compact in which both territorial integrity and non-interference are conditioned upon the effective governance and protection of populations.

However, the microstate offers neither population protection nor governance. It hosts transient investors, leases a legal carve-out from a host state, and performs the rituals of statehood while devastating its substance. In essence, sovereignty is a responsibility to be assumed, rather than a product waiting to be chosen and purchased.



Simultaneously, the accountability vacuum is fundamental, as algorithmic systems pose structural challenges to traditional accountability (Koene et al., 2019). Specifically, in a smart contract-governed microstate, there is no human decision-maker to interrogate and no board to hold accountable. As a result, consequences materialize, and no one is responsible, which is parallel to Decentralized Autonomous Organizations. As Patel (2026) reports, DAOs constitute a structural rupture in the taxonomy of legal persons with no human directors or fixed domiciles. Here, the core issue is who the creditor can sue. The code cannot become a defendant, and token holders are dispersed or even pseudonymous. Thus, the libertarian microstates encounter the same problem: when algorithmic governance brings harm, there is no identifiable person to take legal responsibility.

As these two vacuums converge, the cyber attribution literature indicates a sobering reality that there is little international law of cyber attribution, and the absence of consensus has rendered the legal response to cyber attacks ineffective (Banks, 2021). If it holds off attacks on conventional states, it would evolve into devastating power for attacks on a microstate governed by code. Ultimately, the libertarian microstates fail the doctrinal test of statehood, the functional test of accountability, and the political test of collective action. In the international legal order, an entity that cannot be held accountable is a legal void.

In conclusion, the libertarian microstate experiment fails at both authorization level and structural level. At the authorization level, neither a coalition of billionaires nor that of countries possesses a legitimate mandate due to the dearth of doctrinal standing or

political will, retrospectively. At the structural level, the microstate generates a sovereignty vacuum and an accountability vacuum, showcasing a legal void that could not be easily sued, defended, or attributed. Hence, returning to the core question this paper discusses, the answer is no, the libertarian microstate experiment would not be permitted. Again, sovereignty is a trusteeship to be earned, rather than a protection to be purchased. Without accountability frameworks in place before experimentation, such an experiment cannot be justified.

For the Wrong Reasons

Consider the following three examples: a student does exercises every day and finishes extra work, but his primary initiative is not his love for knowledge, instead, it is to get higher scores; a business reduces carbon dioxide emissions to increase sales as having an environmental-friendly brand image, attracting more customers, leading to higher sales; law enforcement agencies strictly enforce regulations, such as issuing fines for running red lights and imposing penalties for drunk driving, resulting from performance evaluations, pressure from superiors, or public scrutiny, rather than driven by a genuine commitment to justice and public safety. Are they ever wrong to do the right thing for the wrong reasons? The essay will analyze the problem from short-term and long-term perspectives by focusing on consequentialism and deontology.

Consequentialism, advocated by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, evaluates actions primarily according to their outcomes (Brink, 2022; Crimmins, 2015). With that being said, selfish motives may be acceptable if they lead to beneficial results. In contrast, deontologists such as Immanuel Kant argue that morality depends on whether it follows moral duties, principles, or rules rather than on its consequences (Ramsauer, 2023).

Social issues such as inequality, corruption, and environmental pollution share common characteristics: urgency, large-scale impacts, and ongoing harm such that delaying resolution increases social costs. Specifically, as time passes, poverty affects

more people; and corruption continues to erode institutions and undermine public trust; pollution exacerbates. Under these situations, the primary focus is to reduce harm immediately. Moreover, the efficiency, scale, and effectiveness of a solution are more important the motivation behind it. In other words, the central question is whether the action contributes to the well-being of society, aligning with Bentham's "the pleasure pain framework," which holds that the moral value of an action should be evaluated according to the amount of pleasure it produces and the amount of pain it prevents. Similarly, from a utilitarian perspective, motives are judged according to the utility they generate for society, supported by John Stuart Mill, who argues that while motives may reveal an individual's character, they do not determine the morality of an action when they have no effect on its consequences (Brink, 2022). Therefore, when facing urgent social problems, a solution that effectively reduces harm and benefits a large number of people is preferred, even it is driven by imperfect or self-interested motivations. For instance, someone donated $100,000,000 to help impoverished children in order to evade taxes is considered morally good as the donation itself created positive social utility.

On the other hand, deontologist Kant argues that an action is morally right only when it is performed from duty and in accordance with a maxim that can be universalized (Ramsaur, 2023). However, in the context of urgent and large-scale social crises, the focus on morally pure motivations may create practical difficulties, as insisting on such motivations may delay an effective response.

Hence, from a pragmatic perspective, when confronting impactful, urgent problems, doing the right thing for the wrong reasons is justified.

In the long run, morally good motivations are important for societal stability. Societal development not only needs efficiency but also requires predictability, cooperation, and trust, as works such as business transactions and governance depend on people's collaboration, which requires trust. An outcome-oriented approach incentivizes people to exploit rules and institutions to find a way to reach the goal with minimum cost. Then, from Jeremy Bentham's perspective, policymakers could modify regulations (Crimmins, 2015). Yet, this solution faces an important limitation: institutional reforms are often reactive, which means that they always leave behind circumvention. As a result, societies may become trapped in a recurring cycle of loopholes, exploitation, and revision. Consistent revisions evoke public distrust in institutions. According to Luhmann (1979), trust functions as a mechanism for reducing social complexity. In a low-trust society, every contract requires additional review, every transaction demands greater scrutiny, and every institution needs more monitoring and oversight, leading to increase in explicit costs and implicit costs: adding explicit costs such as employing people to monitor and review and raising implicit costs like hesitation and doubt. If the society consistently promotes the idea that outcomes are all that matter, individuals are incentivized to optimize for measurable results, such as officials wanting to meet their performance targets and schools seeking to increase college admission rates, rather than the underlying social goals, like

establishing the rule of law and cultivating thinking ability, those results are intended to serve.

From a deontological perspective, certain moral principles, such as honesty, responsibility, and respect for others, possess intrinsic worth regardless of the outcomes they produce (Walschots, 2022). Students being honest when taking exams may get lower scores than those who cheat. However, the dishonest students may develop the belief that they can always earn high grades without studying, lagging behind others and hindering intellectual development in the long run. In addition, if the society overlooks the importance of these properties, the premises of its effective operation collapse. Note that there is a distinction between acting in accordance with duty and acting from duty (Walschots, 2022). A company adopts environmentally friendly practices because the government provides supports such as subsidies. Meanwhile, a company that protects the environment because it recognizes a moral obligation to do so acts from duty and therefore possesses genuine moral worth. Actions performed from duty provide a more stable basis for social cooperation in the long run because they do not depend on external rewards and regulations. Consequently, while doing the right thing for the wrong reasons may be justifiable in the short term, the preservation of social stability requires people to act for the right reasons in the long term.

Overall, whether it is wrong to do the right thing for the wrong reason depends on the time horizon from which the action is evaluated. In the short term, doing the right thing for the wrong reasons can be effective in achieving desirable outcomes and

solving problems, while acting for the right reasons is ultimately indispensable for ensuring long-term social stability.

The Weight of a Name

Sadness, fear, exhaustion, and distraction are familiar parts of human experience. Yet the language we use to describe them has changed. Experiences once discussed primarily in personal or emotional terms may now also be understood through psychiatric diagnoses. For some people, receiving a diagnosis brings relief, offering an explanation for difficulties they have struggled to understand. For others, the boundary between ordinary distress and mental disorder may be less clear. This raises a question: when does naming a condition help us understand it, and when might the name begin to define the experience itself?

Before addressing the debate, it is necessary to distinguish mental illness from ordinary emotional fluctuations. According to DSM-5-TR (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition, Text Revision), an expected or culturally approved response to a common stressor or loss, such as the death of a loved one, is not a mental disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2022).

In contemporary psychiatry, diagnoses are primarily based on standardized diagnostic systems such as the DSM-5-TR and the International Classification of Diseases (ICD). These manuals provide objective diagnostic criteria, including symptom types, duration, frequency, and severity, allowing clinicians to assess whether a patient meets the threshold for a particular disorder.

However, psychiatric diagnosis is not entirely objective: different clinicians may evaluate the same symptoms differently

(Hyman, 2010). What makes things worse is that, unlike many physical illnesses that can be confirmed through laboratory tests or imaging, mental disorders often rely on patients' self-reported experiences. Nevertheless, patients may not describe their symptoms accurately, or overstate their feelings, leading to a wider gap between the doctor's diagnosis and the real situation.

Therefore, the increasing prevalence of mental illness diagnoses may reflect both improved recognition of previously overlooked conditions and the possibility that normal psychological experiences are increasingly being medicalized.

Current diagnostic criteria may contribute to over-medicalization when emotional fluctuations resulting from ordinary life events and temporary behavioral deviations are treated as pathological conditions rather than normal experiences. Medicalization is the process by which nonmedical problems become defined and treated as medical problems, often requiring medical treatment (Sedler, 2016).

By deleting the bereavement exclusion in DSM-5, around 25–35% of bereavement-related depressive episodes will be diagnosed as major depressive disorder (Iglewicz et al., 2013). However, following the death of a loved one, individuals commonly experience sadness, insomnia, loss of motivation, and frequent crying, all of which can be normal responses rather than symptoms of a mental disorder.

The establishment of Disruptive Mood Dysregulation Disorder (DMDD), a diagnosis characterized by persistent irritability and severe recurrent temper outbursts in children, in DSM-5 was initially designed to reduce the misdiagnosis of children with

bipolar disorder, which increased nearly fortyfold between 1994 and 2003, while creating a new "mental illness" that is in fact normal emotional fluctuations in puberty (Havens et al., 2022).

The diagnosis of Somatic Symptom Disorder (SSD) in DSM-5 cancels the requirement for medically unexplained symptoms and only requires excessive thoughts, anxiety, and behaviors to identify, leading to a significant increase in SSD prevalence from around 5–7% to 30%, or even 56% in some communities, in which reactions such as cancer patients naturally worrying about their illness may sometimes be interpreted as symptoms of SSD (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Thus, DSM-5 contributes to over-medicalization.

What's more, differences in psychiatrists' subjective interpretations may result in patients with similar symptoms being diagnosed with different mental disorders. Under conditions of high workload and limited consultation time, clinicians may not be able to fully understand the patient's background, the causes, and duration of their symptoms and rely more heavily on heuristics and symptom checklists, increasing the risk of explaining temporary emotional fluctuations as mental health issues, leading to diagnostic errors.

Cultural norms and regional practices can also shape clinicians' perceptions of what constitutes normal or abnormal behavior (Fabrega, 1987). As patients report symptoms, doctors have to decide which behaviors are normal and which are abnormal. People from different cultures and regions have different emotional expressions, social preferences, and tolerance levels. Hence, the same behavior can be given different implications

under various cultural environments. Differences may arise in how clinicians evaluate the severity of symptoms, thereby affecting diagnostic decisions.

Another factor affecting diagnosis is confirmation bias. It means that if the patient is suspected of having a certain disease at first, the doctor will focus more on information supporting the initial hypothesis and overlook opposing symptoms (Zapata-Ospina et al., 2024).

Diagnostic labels may influence how individuals perceive themselves. According to labeling theory, once people are identified as mentally ill, they may internalize the diagnosis, and behavior increasingly conforms to the label, even if it is a diagnostic error (Fox & Earnshaw, 2023). Symptoms may then appear to confirm the original diagnosis.

Environmental factors also indirectly lead to over-diagnosis. Some pharmaceutical companies and mental health platforms expand the boundaries of mental illness in order to increase profits.

For example, GlaxoSmithKline (GSK), one of the biggest biopharma companies in the world that discovers, develops, and delivers medicines and vaccines, developed a marketing plan to sell Paxil, a medicine mainly used to treat social phobia, by claiming that social phobia is common and severe, blurring the distinction between normal shyness and psychiatric illness.

Similarly, Eli Lilly & Co. promoted Strattera (atomoxetine hydrochloride) by blurring the boundary between modern life distraction, disorganization, and frustration with adult attention deficit disorder (ADD).

On TikTok, many videos present normal emotional experiences as a sign of borderline personality disorder or abuse, and more than half of the most popular mental-health videos contain misinformation (Starvaggi et al., 2024). The algorithm will continue to recommend mental health videos after users watch such videos, encouraging individuals to interpret ordinary emotional experiences through psychiatric labels and increasing self-diagnosis, finally leading to over-pathologization.

However, an increase in psychiatric diagnoses does not necessarily indicate over-diagnosis. It may also reflect better recognition of conditions that were previously overlooked or misunderstood. In the past, limited awareness, social stigma, and restricted access to mental health services could prevent individuals from receiving an accurate diagnosis. Improvements in psychiatric research, diagnostic guidelines, and public awareness may allow more people to recognize persistent difficulties and seek professional help.

Moreover, diagnostic labels do not always restrict an individual's identity. For some people, a diagnosis provides an explanation for experiences that previously seemed confusing or isolating. It can also make appropriate treatment, educational accommodations, and social support more accessible. From this perspective, the increasing number of diagnoses may represent progress rather than excessive medicalization. The challenge, therefore, is not simply to reduce diagnoses, but to distinguish between cases in which medical recognition is necessary and those in which ordinary experiences risk being unnecessarily pathologized.

Over-diagnosis of mental illness can bring negative impacts to

individuals and society. In terms of individuals, one short-term effect is that normal emotional fluctuations may be diagnosed as mental health problems, which may increase worries about mental health and create an additional psychological burden.

What's more, patients undergoing unnecessary medical treatment could experience medication side effects such as weight gain, fatigue, and sleep disturbances that harm their quality of life. In the long run, individuals may become dependent on long-term treatment despite initially experiencing only mild or temporary symptoms.

For at-risk individuals, unnecessary interventions may divert attention and resources from other forms of support. Meanwhile, patients with severe conditions who need help may face long waiting times for treatment. However, these shortages cannot be attributed to over-diagnosis alone; limited funding, unequal access, and insufficient mental health services also contribute to the problem.

From a social perspective, concerns about unnecessary diagnoses may weaken public trust in psychiatric expertise. Excessive medicalization of pain may also make it harder to regard stress and sadness as normal aspects of life (Hyman, 2010; Sedler, 2016). Yet the opposite danger is equally important: dismissing genuine symptoms as ordinary distress may discourage people from seeking necessary care.

Ultimately, the question is not whether mental illness is simply over-diagnosed or better recognized. Both possibilities can exist, and distinguishing between them requires attention to individual circumstances rather than diagnosis numbers alone. Psychiatric

categories are valuable because they help clinicians recognize suffering, communicate about it, and provide treatment. But these categories must remain open to careful interpretation, rather than becoming rigid definitions of the people they describe.

A diagnosis can give an experience a name. It should not be allowed to become the whole story of the person who carries it.

EPILOGUE

The Limits of Consolation

There are forms of suffering that cannot be removed simply by understanding their causes. We may know that loss is inevitable and still grieve, or recognize that a misfortune lies beyond our control and still fear it. Yet we continue to search for explanations, as though understanding something might make it easier to bear. Philosophy offers consolation in three dimensions: the ontological challenge of death, the practical challenge of uncertainty, and the existential challenge of loneliness and meaninglessness. Unlike medicine, which seeks to treat the physical or psychological sources of suffering, philosophy primarily seeks to transform how individuals understand and respond to it. Rather than eliminating pain, it offers ways to coexist with it and perhaps reduce its impact. Nevertheless, philosophical consolation remains limited: while philosophy can provide guidance for confronting suffering, it cannot completely resolve pain or anxiety.

Death is often the only thing that humans are confident will happen, but cannot use experience to resolve in most cases. By changing people's understanding of death, philosophy alleviates the fear associated with it. This reduction in fear of death is not a disregard for human life, but the realization that the existence of death is what makes people cherish life. "Letter to Menoeceus,"

written by ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus, argues that "death is nothing to us" because fear originates from mistaken beliefs that people regard death as harm that could be experienced (Epicurus, 1925). However, death deprives sensation, and no sensation is suffering. By reframing death as the cessation rather than the experience of pain, Epicurus seeks to reduce the fear associated with mortality. Moreover, in "Of the Nature of Things," Lucretius observes that people are generally untroubled by the infinite period before their birth, despite not existing during that time (Lucretius, 2008). Yet they often fear the equally non-existent state after death. Since the two states are symmetrical, the asymmetry in our emotional responses suggests that the fear of death does not arise from actual experience or genuine harm. Instead, it stems from imagination, distorted beliefs, and the tendency to project ourselves into a future in which we no longer exist.

Philosophy offers practical consolation by redirecting individuals' attention from uncontrollable external events to aspects of life that remain within their control. Unlike death, which is generally regarded as an inevitable feature of human existence, events such as disease, betrayal, financial loss, or social failure are contingent rather than necessary as they often generate emotions such as anger, regret, frustration and anxiety that are out of individuals' control. "Meditations" point out that things themselves have no fixed implications (Marcus Aurelius, 1887). Meanings are given by explanations, and by changing one's interpretation of obstacles, individuals can transform them from sources of frustration into opportunities for growth, therefore reducing pain. Lucius Annaeus Seneca' s premeditation malorum

suggests taking the initiative to imagine the worst situation to reduce fear (Seneca, 1969). If one has never considered the possibility of failure, when failure takes place, their cognition collapses, leading to huge sufferings. On the other hand, if he has accepted failure as a possible part of life, the event becomes a confirmation of a known possibility rather than a catastrophic surprise. In addition, by confronting misfortunes in advance, the space for imagination decreases, thereby reducing uncertainty that often fuels anxiety.

Different from ontological and practical suffering, existential pain does not necessarily arise from a particular event: one may be physically safe, financially secure, and free from hardship, but still experience loneliness, emptiness, or a sense that life lacks meaning. At the beginning of Albert Camus' "The Myth of Sisyphus, " "Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy" indicates that feelings of loneliness, emptiness, and meaninglessness reflect an inquiry into the worth of life (Camus, 1991). Hence, previous methods, changing our realization of death and results, cannot resolve it, as ontological and practical suffering presuppose that life is worth living; they merely concern how one should live. Existential suffering, by contrast, challenges that very assumption by questioning whether life ought to be lived at all. From Camus' perspective, we should acknowledge these feelings because it is unrealistic to expect everything in life to possess a clear and comprehensive meaning. Sartre develops this idea in "Existentialism is a Humanism" through his famous claim that "existence precedes essence." (Sartre, n.d.) Human

beings are not born with predetermined purposes or values; they define themselves through their choices and actions. Existential consolation therefore lies not in creating meanings.

Overall, for ontological challenge of death, philosophy suggests that we could reshape our cognition of death; changes in our understanding of obstacles may help resolve practical challenge of uncertainty; and creating meanings can resolve the existential challenge of loneliness and meaninglessness. Despite addressing different forms of suffering, the philosophical approaches discussed above share a common strategy: instead of eliminating the external sources of distress, they seek to transform the way individuals interpret and respond to them.

However, emotions often operate independently of rational judgment, and, in most cases, emotions brought about by sensibility surpass rationality, which means that although a person may intellectually accept Epicurus' argument that death is nothing to us, fear may nevertheless persist; likewise, recognizing that illness, betrayal, or failure lie beyond one's control does not automatically eliminate grief, anger, or anxiety. What' s more, even if philosophy can help people cope with suffering, some pain still requires realistic changes. For example, it is true that changing the way of thinking can help victims of domestic violence keep psychological resilience and reduce despair, but it cannot stop abusers from continuing violence and changing the dangerous environment. As a result, sufferers still require legal protection, social assistance, and to leave the abusive environment.

In addition to the gap between rational insight and emotional reality, philosophy's consolation is concentrated by both

irreducible social and relational dimensions of human suffering. As aforementioned, philosophical traditions, including Epicureanism, Stoicism, and existentialism, focus on the individual as the primary source of consolation by addressing how solitary lives with death, meaninglessness, and uncertainty. However, human beings are not isolated rational agents, but are fundamentally relational beings whose both physical and mental well-being depends on interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships. Take grief as one example. Beyond a personal experience, it is a shared one as the loss of a loved one is often compounded by the absence of communal mourning. As loneliness arises from not only an absence of meaning but also meaningful connection with the loved one, people often intensify their fear of death by the thought of one's non-existence and prospect of leaving loved ones behind. As highlighted by Stoicism, we risk overlooking the truth that we are not selves who then enter into relationships but are those who are constituted by relationships. To further discuss the relationship definition from a practical perspective. To further discuss the relationship definition from a practical perspective: even if individuals intellectually accept that death is natural, pain of losing a loved one still remains, causing severe emotional harm. Although philosophy can help individuals learn that grief and death is a natural process, it cannot provide practical support that comes from others, such as the shared ritual of mourning or the collective act of remembering. Therefore, consolation is also a social practice that involves the company of others, acts of warm care, and affirmation that one's suffering is acknowledged.

Moreover, the act of seeking consolation through philosophy

acquires a level of material security and intellectual privilege. Engaging with Seneca or Camus requires not only time but also education and access to texts, which are often unevenly distributed across populations. Therefore, philosophical consolation is not universally accessible. In a secure and developed city, the practice of those with leisure time to think and participate is possible, but in a poor city, individuals have to firsthand try to survive. However, this does not diminish the value of philosophical consolation but rather reshapes it in the real-life context that philosophy speaks to those and consolidates with those who can afford to listen.

Philosophical consolation is valuable but limited. By offering frameworks for reframing suffering, tools for reflection, and resources for rebuilding resilience, philosophy can help individuals confront experiences they cannot change. Yet understanding does not always make suffering disappear. Philosophy cannot undo a loss, make an unjust situation fair, or replace the presence of another person. Nor can it substitute for the material conditions and social relationships necessary for well-being. Sometimes what we need is not a better argument, but someone willing to listen, a safer place to live, or the means to change our circumstances. As a way of thinking that opens possibilities for enduring pain and finding meaning, the consolation philosophy offers is real but partial.

▶▶

References

Allen, A. L., & Rothman, J. E. (2024). Postmortem privacy. *Michigan Law Review, 123*(2), 285–354. https://doi.org/10.36644/mlr.123.2.postmortem

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

Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986, c. 14 (UK). https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1986/14/contents

Austen, J. (1813). *Pride and prejudice.* Project Gutenberg. https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/1342

Austen, J. (1815). *Emma.* Project Gutenberg. https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/158

Banks, W. C. (2021). Cyber attribution and state responsibility. *International Law Studies, 97, 1039–1072.* https://digital commons.usnwc.edu/ils/vol97/iss1/43/

Baxter, H. (2025, September 29). Seasteading is making a comeback—but these utopian paradises on the high seas have a history of failure. *The Independent.*

https://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/seasteading-peter-thiel-silicon-valley-oceanix-b2822563.html

Beschta, R. L., & Ripple, W. J. (2016). Riparian vegetation recovery in Yellowstone: The first two decades after wolf reintroduction. *Biological Conservation, 198,* 93–103. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biocon.2016.03.031

Brink, D. (2022). Mill's moral and political philosophy. In E. N. Zalta & U. Nodelman (Eds.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy.* Stanford University. https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/mill-moral-political/

Camus, A. (1991). *The myth of Sisyphus* (J. O'Brien, Trans.). Vintage Books. (Original work published 1942)

Carnevale, A. P., Cheah, B., & Hanson, A. R. (2015). *The economic value of college majors.* Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/valueofcollegemajors/

Chetty, R., Friedman, J. N., Saez, E., Turner, N., & Yagan, D. (2017). *Mobility report cards: The role of colleges in intergenerational mobility* (NBER Working Paper No. 23618). National Bureau of Economic Research. https://doi.org/10.3386/w23618

Crimmins, J. E. (2015). Jeremy Bentham. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*. Stanford University. https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/bentham/

Epicurus. (1925). Letter to Menoeceus (R. D. Hicks, Trans.). In *The Internet Classics Archive*. Massachusetts Institute of Technology. https://classics.mit.edu/Epicurus/menoec.html

Fabrega, H. (1987). Psychiatric diagnosis. *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease, 175*(7), 383–394. https://doi.org/10.1097/00005053-198707000-00001

Facebook. (n.d.). *What happens to your Facebook account if you pass away.* https://www.facebook.com/help/103897939701143/

Fox, A. B., & Earnshaw, V. A. (2023). The relationship between mental illness stigma and self-labeling. *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal, 46*(2). https://doi.org/10.1037/prj0000552

Grohmann, R., & Barbosa, A. C. (2025). Sovereignty-as-a-service: How big tech companies co-opt and redefine digital sovereignty. *Media, Culture & Society, 48*(2), 416–424. https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437251395003

Harbinja, E., McVey, M., & Edwards, L. (2024). Post-mortem privacy and digital legacy—A qualitative enquiry. *SCRIPTed, 21*(4), 4–39.

https://doi.org/10.2218/scrip.210024.4

Havens, J. F., et al. (2022). Editorial: From bipolar disorder to disruptive mood dysregulation disorder: Challenges to diagnostic and treatment specificity in traumatized youths. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 61*(3), 364–365. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2021.07.012

Hobbs, H., & Williams, G. (2022). *Micronations and the search for sovereignty.* Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009150132

Huang, W., Arora, P., & Zarzycka, M. (2026). Geographies of hope: Rethinking deepfake harms and gender AI safety in the Global South. *Media and Communication, 14*. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.10969

Hughes, T. (2026). The political theory of techno-colonialism. *European Journal of Political Theory, 25*(1), 70–93. https://doi.org/10.1177/14748851241249819

Hyman, S. E. (2010). The diagnosis of mental disorders: The problem of reification. *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology, 6,* 155–179. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.clinpsy.3.022806.091532

Iglewicz, A., et al. (2013). The removal of the bereavement exclusion in the DSM-5: Exploring the evidence. *Current Psychiatry Reports,*

15(11), Article 413.

https://doi.org/10.1007/s11920-013-0413-0

Kemple, J. J. (2008). *Career academies: Long-term impacts on work, education, and transitions to adulthood.* MDRC.

https://www.mdrc.org/work/publications/career-academies-long-term-impacts-work-education-and-transitions-adulthood

Koene, A., Clifton, C., Hatada, Y., Webb, H., Patel, M., Machado, C., LaViolette, J., Richardson, R., & Reisman, D. (2019). *A governance framework for algorithmic accountability and transparency.* European Parliamentary Research Service.

https://doi.org/10.2861/59990

Laurison, D., & Friedman, S. (2016). The class pay gap in higher professional and managerial occupations. *American Sociological Review, 81*(4), 668–695.

https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122416653602

Long, M. C. (2007). Affirmative action and its alternatives in public universities: What do we know? *Public Administration Review, 67*(2), 315–330.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6210.2007.00715.x

Lucretius. (2008). *Of the nature of things* (W. E. Leonard, Trans.). Project Gutenberg.

https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/785

Luhmann, N. (1979). *Trust and power*. John Wiley & Sons.

Marcus Aurelius. (1887). *Meditations* (J. Collier, Trans.; A. Zimmern, Rev.). Walter Scott.

Olson, M. (1965). *The logic of collective action: Public goods and the theory of groups*. Harvard University Press. https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674041660

Patel, K. (2026). The personality problem: Can a DAO have a legal identity? Towards a purposive theory of DAO legal personality and a model legislative framework for India. *Indian Journal of Legal Review, 6*(7). https://doi.org/10.65393/IJLR6I747

PBS. (2008, September 14). *Wolf wars: America's campaign to eradicate the wolf*. Nature. https://www.pbs.org/wnet/nature/the-wolf-that-changed-america-wolf-wars-americas-campaign-to-eradicate-the-wolf/4312/

Próspera ZEDE. (2024, November 20). *Honduran Supreme Court's ZEDE ruling threatens livelihoods of thousands of Honduran families: Próspera ZEDE remains in force under Honduran law* [Press release].

https://pzgps.hn/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/PZ_Press_Release_11202024.pdf

Quilling, C. (2022, May 20). The future of digital evidence authentication at the International Criminal Court. *Journal of Public and International Affairs.* https://jpia.princeton.edu/news/future-digital-evidence-authentication-international-criminal-court

Ramsauer, L. (2023). Kant's derivation of imperatives of duty. *Kantian Review.* https://doi.org/10.1017/S1369415423000420

Raza, A., Basit, A., Amin, A., Arfeen, Z. A., Masud, M. I., Fayyaz, U., & Jumani, T. A. (2026). A comprehensive review of deepfake detection techniques: From traditional machine learning to advanced deep learning architectures. *AI, 7*(2), Article 68. https://doi.org/10.3390/ai7020068

Ripple, W. J., & Beschta, R. L. (2012). Trophic cascades in Yellowstone: The first 15 years after wolf reintroduction. *Biological Conservation, 145*(1), 205–213. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biocon.2011.11.005

Rivera, L. A. (2015). *Pedigree: How elite students get elite jobs.* Princeton University Press.

Rothstein, B., & Stolle, D. (2008). The state and social capital: An institutional theory of generalized trust. *Comparative Politics, 40*(4), 441–459. https://doi.org/10.2307/20434095

Russell, W. M. S., & Burch, R. L. (1959). *The principles of humane experimental technique*. Methuen.

Sartre, J.-P. (n.d.). *Existentialism is a humanism* (P. Mairet, Trans.). Marxists Internet Archive. https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/sartre/works/exist/sartre.htm

Schiff, K. J., Schiff, D. S., & Bueno, N. S. (2025). The liar's dividend: Can politicians claim misinformation to evade accountability? *American Political Science Review, 119*(1), 71–90. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055423001454

Sedler, M. J. (2016). Medicalization in psychiatry: The medical model, descriptive diagnosis, and lost knowledge. *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy, 19*(2), 247–252. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11019-015-9670-5

Seneca. (1969). *Letters from a Stoic* (R. Campbell, Trans.). Penguin Books.

Sharmin, T. (2025). Cancellation of the ZEDE law in Honduras

and international investment law issues. *Journal of International Trade Law and Policy, 24*(2), 101–125. https://doi.org/10.1108/JITLP-10-2024-0065

Simonite, T. (2022, March 17). A Zelensky deepfake was quickly defeated. The next one might not be. *WIRED*. https://www.wired.com/story/zelensky-deepfake-facebook-twitter-playbook/

Starvaggi, I., et al. (2024). Mental health misinformation on social media: Review and future directions. *Current Opinion in Psychology, 56*, Article 101738. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2023.101738

Syria Justice and Accountability Centre. (2026). *Documenting the Syrian war at trial: A comparative analysis of recent universal jurisdiction cases in France, Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands, and the United States of America*. https://syriaaccountability.org/content/files/2026/02/Documenting-the-Syrian-War-at-Trial---SJAC---2-26-2026.pdf

TIME Staff. (2018, June 21). The story behind TIME's Trump "Welcome to America" cover. *TIME*. https://time.com/5317522/donald-trump-border-cover/

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2025, August 28). *Field of degree:*

Business.

https://www.bls.gov/ooh/field-of-degree/business/business-field-of-degree.htm

U.S. Census Bureau. (n.d.). *About the American Community Survey.*

https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/about.html

U.S. Department of Education. (n.d.). *College Scorecard.*

https://collegescorecard.ed.gov/

Walschots, M. (2022). Kant and the duty to act from duty. *History of Philosophy Quarterly, 39*(1), 59–75.

https://doi.org/10.2307/48820650

Ward, E. H. (2020, November 25). *The gray wolf under the Endangered Species Act (ESA): A case study in listing and delisting challenges* (CRS Report No. R46184). Congressional Research Service.

https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46184

Zapata-Ospina, J. P., et al. (2024). The adjustment disorder is not a wastebasket diagnosis: A grounded theory study of psychiatrists' and psychologists' clinical reasoning. *European Journal of Psychotraumatology, 15*(1).

https://doi.org/10.1080/20008066.2024.2390332