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NEMU'S RAZOR

For Rani Viva, Nemu's midwife.

Moving from knowing to not knowing - this is good.

Moving from not knowing to knowing - this is sickness ...

The sage isn't sick. He's sick of his sickness.

The Tao Te Ching

My first job after Japan took me to Europe, and I found far more in Bavaria than just clothing shops when I wandered into a street called Occamstrasse. There was an Occam taxi service (where they presumably get you from A to B by the most direct route), an Occam supermarket (with, I imagine, only essential groceries), and an Occam pub, (where perhaps they siphon alcohol directly from keg to stomach). The very idea of drinking made me feel sick though, on that day. Oktoberfest nearly killed me the day before.

It was all good fun to begin with, men with curvy sausages and fraulines with huge jugs, but on emerging from the toilet into a massive tent of three thousand shouting, singing Bavarians, stamping on tables and clanging their enormous tankards, it took me over half an hour to locate my friends. I eventually found them and ordered another litre, but the call of nature soon sent me across the tent again, and when I came out of the loo I was as lost as before, but more drunk. I wandered in circles amongst the pretzels, and never found my friends, but I did find some funny Italians. 'Do you feel a-lika-skinin-up?' they asked. I did, so we made a joint. The rest of Oktoberfest was a barely lucid dream set to oom-pah music, and I didn't see another friendly face until I peeled myself off the floor the next morning.

Occam would have made a beeline back to his table. Back in the fourteenth century, Brother William of Occam Abbey proposed that a question be answered with the simplest explanation possible. More

formally, one should not increase beyond what is necessary the number of entities required to explain something. It seems fair enough, but Occam's razor soon caused havoc in a religious dispute. The Franciscans followed the example of the Apostles by living as beggars without private property. The Pope, who was the largest real estate owner in the known world, took objection to this belief, and Occam was called over from England to adjudicate. He drew his razor, cut through the humbug and found to his surprise that his beloved Pope was at fault, that he was, in fact, a heretic. Furthermore, the Pope was 'stubbornly heretical', maintaining his heresy even after it had been explained to him, which disqualified him from the office of the holy hat. Occam was excommunicated and spent four years under house arrest. He was forced to flee the papal court, but he remained in Europe publishing anti-Papal tracts, and his razor became one of the cornerstones of science. Scientific theories are to be as simple as possible. This keeps us from getting lost amidst the pretzels baked up in our convoluted brains.

300 years later, Galileo looked up at the same old sky and saw something new. According to *The Bible*, the Pope, and nearly everyone in Christendom, Man stood firm on the earth at the centre of Creation against the backdrop of the fixed stars, with the sun, the moon, and the planets looping around him in curly-whirly epicycles. Galileo took Occam's bread-knife to the half-baked pretzels and made a nice packet of bagels from the orbits, including the earth's. In the realm of ideas, all he did was nudge the sun to the centre, but it was blasphemy for the old hats of the old cosmos.

In Christendom, the heliocentric heresy dates back to Copernicus, but he only broke his prudent silence on his deathbed in 1543. Giordano Bruno was burned at the stake in 1600 for opening his mouth on the subject, but Galileo was not one to keep quiet. He pointed to the moons of Jupiter, stubbornly heretical heavenly bodies defying the geocentric model by orbiting something other than the earth. He invited his detractors to look through his telescope, a nautical tool he had redesigned and turned towards the sky, but they declined. Their model, indeed the Creator Himself allowed no such moons, so they concluded that the newfangled instrument must be at fault. They would not sit back and allow man to be pushed from centre stage. Galileo loved the Church, and had no reformist agenda, but in 1616, the Inquisition forbade him from teaching his devilish doctrine and banned his *Dialogue on the Two Great Systems of the World*. He died under house arrest in 1642.

Why did this model provoke such an extreme reaction? We build our lives with our theories, and manipulate the world with them. Our theories advise us how to behave. Do we ignore a crazy man, or incarcerate him; do we try to cure him or learn from him? Do we give him lithium or therapy, poke needles in his meridians or touch electrodes to his head? Do we call in an exorcist? It all depends on our theory of madness. We grasp the world with our theories, they are the hands of the mind, but Occam's razor amputates our hands, leaving us with no idea how to approach a problem. A radical new theory forces a culture to question its assumptions, and to redefine itself. Most people prefer their stale old pretzels to freshly baked bagels, but eventually they will be rejected. After the blur of Oktoberfest, the streets are awash with vomit, and whilst the Bavarian Illuminati keep their feet clean, the rest of us have to stumble home through the filth. My hangover lasted for two days. The ban on Galileo's book lasted over 200 years, and a rather tardy Vatican finally cleared him of any wrongdoing in 1992.

Occam would have loved his adopted hometown. The language is direct and the people go straight to the point. When you ask '*Sprekenzi Englischer?*' in a terrible accent, a Bavarian might respond with a frown and a '*nein, ich spreche Deutsche.*' No frills, and no messing around. All a great party needs is trombones, leather shorts, low cut dresses, and beer by the litre. *Proust!* Occam would have made a great English drunk at Oktoberfest, swaying and scowling, eavesdropping and cursing into the sleeve of his habit, until some pontificating pontiff in a poncy hat starts yammering away in front of the fraulines, and his whole know-it-all air starts to get Occam's goat, and it winds him up and pisses him off until he loses it and turns on him. 'Bullshit!' he shouts, 'it's bullshit and you know it is, you smug twat! Come on, I'll fahkin 'av yer!' Occam's razor takes away but gives nothing back. The monk has nothing to offer; he just takes your beloved beliefs outside and gives them a good kicking.

Occam eyeballs the Pope across the beer-tent and nods towards the table football. The Pope calmly drains his glass of red and accepts the challenge, and the ultimate dream team approaches the table. Magellan fashions a ball from a beer-mat and rolls it into play. The Pope knocks it up the field but Galileo intercepts at the back line, and sends it past the Pope's strikers to Newton. The two old virgins eye each other for a furtive moment as Newton's fingers tickle his abacus under the table. He passes to Kant with startling precision as the Pope spins poles wildly. Kant gazes at the table and then calmly kicks the ball to the corner, where it comes to a gradual stop at the edge of the Milky Way. The Pope starts shaking the table and muttering incantations, and Occam's quick eyes dart around the tent and fall on Einstein, enjoying

a pipe at the bar. Einstein strikes a match, and the table jumps up and flips into a sphere. The Pope recoils shrieking, his hat tumbling as the ball arcs gracefully through the air into Occam's glass. 'You lot are lame' he announces. Einstein smiles his goofy smile, but the monk glares back, saying 'I'm off to play dice with God.' He clinks glasses with Schrödinger, downs his pint, and burps a foul cloud of gas on his way out.ⁱ

The root of the problem is that science proves nothing. All that can be established is that something is **not** true, so a theory floats until punctured by anomalies. Models are born, they grow and compete, and they are killed, but they never become true;¹ they become superstitions. Medieval thinkers had no idea how God pushed the planets round, and we still don't know why there is a gravitational force between particles. We also have no idea why the sizes and distances between planets are perfect harmonic relationships, and why the quantum world is so bizarre.

What is knowledge anyway? It is not physical reality, but neither does it belong in the realm of metaphysics with perfect circles that can never be drawn, ageless Goddesses of sublime beauty, and mathematical constants with infinite decimal tails. Knowledge relates to nothing but itself, and leads nowhere but back to itself:

What is sugar?

A sweet, white, crystalline substance.

What is white?

The absence of colour.

What does it look like?

The colour of snow and sugar lumps.

What is sweet?

The flavour of doughnuts and other sugary things.

ⁱ 1519: Magellan sets sail on the first circumnavigation of the globe.

1632: Galileo publishes Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems.

1755: Kant publishes General History of Nature and Theory of the Heavens proposing that the Milky Way is a lens-shaped galaxy, and one of many galaxies in the universe.

1915: Einstein publishes his General Theory of Relativity

1933: Schrödinger suggests that matter is a function of probability density.

This line of enquiry takes us nowhere. We are none the wiser until we have intimate knowledge of sugar, until our tongues taste and our teeth fall out, after which wordy descriptions are redundant. The same is true for any proposition one can make. In the final analysis it refers to an experience, or we must admit our ignorance:

What are you composed of?

Nerves and sinews, blood and bone, flesh and fluid.

What is all that made of?

Compounds, chemicals, ions.

And what are chemicals made of?

Elements.

What is an element?

The stuff that stuff is made from.

What is an element made of?

Electrons, protons, and neutrons.

What is an electron?

A negatively charged shadow on a photographic plate.

What is it made of?

I don't know, quarks and stuff.

What is a quark?

Will you just shuddup and go to bed already! Ask those Swiss *meshugene*, huh! Do I look like a poidicle physicist?

What we think we know changes. We move the planets and the goalposts, but we can't be sure they will stay where we put them? The sun usually rises in the west, but how do we know it will obey the law tomorrow? Can we be sure of anything?

'Can you bollocks!' bellows Occam as he urinates against the Pearly Gates.

What are you composed of? Ask a Freudian, and you will hear about urges and neuroses, an artist might picture you as line and light, an economist sees demands and tendencies, but who knows? Knowledge is a cauldron of empty sense, suspended over the abyss on invisible strands of nothingness. It is the ultimate logical nihilist, with a team of

ⁱ *The Flippin' Poles* is a sermon about a theory endorsed by Einstein that it might not.

doppelganger defenders ready to block any shot the mind can take. Knowledge always boils down to nothing, which is not a problem in itself, but we invariably confuse subjective knowledge for objective reality. We think we have worked something out, so we stop thinking about it, forgetting that the map is not the territory, and the territory is not terra firma. The menu is not the food, but we only remember when we choke on a mouthful of laminated cardboard. Theories are tools, not truth. Occam preferred the simplest tool for the job, and thanks to his razor we have a fantastic toolbox, but the raw material of life is something different. To cross the abyss to the infinite, we must leave knowledge behind.

Back when philosophers still knew how to make Sophia shudder, Socrates was seeking wisdom from politicians, poets, priests, and others considered wise. They knew a few things about a few things, but they were also egocentric, shortsighted, and ultimately mistaken, because their faith in their incomplete knowledge made them foolish. Socrates maintained his ignorance, and the Oracle at Delphi called him the wisest of men, because at least he knew he was ignorant.

This is a good start, but if knowledge is empty, and nothing we can say about the world is definitively true, what are we to believe in? Occam believed in God, and any other rigidly held belief was an obstacle to his grace. Today's seekers are more sceptical of this God fellow, and with good reason. God and the devil have been used as umbrella terms to explain things beyond our ken, because we fear uncertainty. In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth, he caused the rain to fall and the belly to swell, but as our understanding broadened, the unknown shrank, and scientists moved in on God's territory. Richard Dawkins describes religion as a mind virus one catches from one's parents, but he is talking about doctrines, taboos, guilty urges, and hand-me-down maps of the universe - the outer trappings of religion. The inner, esoteric traditions are far more interesting.

For Gnostics, there was more to God than the unknown; he could be known directly through dreams, insight, and trance. Orthodox churches have long been suspicious of such ideas, and perpetuated the belief that God is present in places beyond our understanding. This simplistic dualism persists today. A miracle cure is recognised by the Vatican only 'when there is no remaining possibility of a natural explanation'.² In other words, if we can explain it scientifically, it is not a miracle, and if we do not understand it, it is. Today, as the supernatural domain shrinks to nothing, jealous medieval Gods are fighting a reactionary counterattack. Concerned parents in the US kick

Darwin out of school, Creationists argue that God left dinosaur remains to test our faith, and pro-lifers burn down abortion clinics.³ Dawkins retaliates by writing sanctimonious bombast like *The God Delusion*, and pointing cameras at rabid fundamentalists to prove that religion is the root of all evil.

Simplistic descriptions of God would never have been very satisfying anyway, even back when He was alive and kicking. Even if the plague was the will of God, a widow might still wonder why God had willed it, otherwise she would be worshipping a random or malicious God, and she may as well fly off to the coven on her broomstick. In 1882, Nietzsche announced that God was dead, and the thinking man breathed a sigh of relief.⁴ The modern scientist may not invoke God in his theories. The eternal questions remain, but without the Holy Inquisition and eternal damnation to worry about, our scope to think is broader.

The established faiths have fallen on hard times, rent apart by scraps and schisms, shamed by child-molesting priests, and given the dunce hat by impossibly stupid Creation Scientists. Assaults have come from all sides, better techniques from Buddhism, funnier stories from Taoism, funkier bass-lines from Rastafarianism, all outcompeting the pallid priests, reactionary imams, wheeler-dealer Brahmins, and nitpicking rabbis who commit the ultimate blasphemy of making God boring. Oy yoy yoy; boring, boring, boring, and more boring! It doesn't matter if you are a tangled beard of orthodoxy or a well-trimmed liberal mincing about the pulpit, God should fill you with chutzpah, or shakti, or spirit, or something, a tender heart or a manic glint in the eye. If you represent something divine, surely some charisma should rub off on you.

The modern churchgoing Brit is a rare creature, treated with suspicion and contempt. There is more excitement in football than in the mainstream churches, and more to be discovered through the Discovery Channel. Religion should be fun, but old-school monotheism with its moralism and its dirges is like a frail old man wheeled out for special occasions, breathing softly through the mucus as he dreams of the good old days.

Jews fast for the Day of Atonement to concentrate on sins rather than stomachs, but it often has the exact opposite effect. Last year, my friend fasted diligently until exactly sunset (7.02pm, according to *The Jewish Chronicle*), at which point she was staring at the clock, cake in one hand and orange juice in the other, like an athlete poised for the starting gun. What good is this complete lack of decorum doing her? How does this bring her closer to God? And she asks me with a sigh if I

retain any sense of Jewish identity! The poor girl is still in love with a Muslim she spent two years with, but she sent him and his strange religion packing, and now spends her time at work surreptitiously searching the J-Date website for an eligible Jew. What is she doing? Does she feel obliged to ensure that her children are as thoroughbred and guilt-ridden as she is?

If this is the nature of religion then we are better off without it. Old farts in moth-eaten dog collars bemoan the loss of faith, but in some ways we are closer to God today than ever before. Without this mind virus, we can follow our own paths in music, mountain climbing, cooking, making love, watching insects, juggling, kung fu fighting, telling stories, playing chess, whatever. Do what thou wilt and keep doing it, and you will learn to concentrate, and find far more meaning than in empty ritual. With a mind full of mumbo jumbo covered in cobwebs, what can we learn in science or on the path?

With the razor in hand, the seeker is free to follow her ideas where they take her, beyond the puke and the pretzels, beyond the bagels, and eventually beyond the confines of the beer tent. The modern secular seeker has at her fingertips incredible resources, science books, lecture courses, translated scriptures from all over the world, meditation classes, devotional music to download, therapies, workshops, and a plethora of sects, from ayahuasca to Zen.¹ The wall to the Zen monastery used to be thick, and novices used to pound on the door for days before being allowed in. In the past, yoga, Latin, and kabbalah were restricted to particular groups, and magickal secrets were buried in code, but today most of the hidden is revealed, and online. Today's acolyte must put aside laziness, business, and TV, and burrow through a different wall, through protective layers of half-truth and half-witted commentary caked over the teachings, but if she does, she can experiment as never before. She can believe what she likes or believe nothing at all. There is no reason why she should believe in God. As Rabbi David Cooper puts it in his excellent *God is a Verb*:

What is God? In a way, there is no God. Our perception of God usually leads to a misunderstanding that seriously undermines our spiritual development.⁵

¹ I use the terms Daimé and ayahuasca interchangeably in this book, but note that there is an important difference. Ayahuasca is made in various ways with various plants. Daimé is made with a specific recipe and ritual, and taken ritually. I can recommend it, but I cannot speak for other ayahuasca groups. There are good ones, but not everyone knows what they are doing, and brewing your own may be a worse idea still. Play safe; this is powerful stuff.

Even if she has swallowed the narcotics of materialism, the lonely vacuum of atheism is far less stifling to the mind than the fiery lakes of hell, and she needn't fear thumbscrews, excommunication, or the death penalty any more, unless she is careless enough to go and do a Rushdie.

Before the Reformation, if you disagreed with the church there was nowhere else to turn, you couldn't just don a skullcap and gatecrash a synagogue. Despite this, Occam went against convention and the immense power of the Pope, risking his life and losing his liberty. What would drive him to attack the Pope he once believed to be infallible? Only love drives drunks to reject their drinking partners. Occam did not believe in God as a theory. He loved God as a reality permeating the universe, in the revealed and the hidden, at the beginning and at the end. His razor is only part of the story, trading insults at the bar is only part of the story; the rest takes place back at the monastery. After an evening arguing with fools, Occam returns home and changes from belligerent drunk into gushingly affectionate lover, reciting poems to his beloved, staying up all night to be near his beloved, praising his beloved before and after every meal.

Over millennia, the monastic tradition developed a range of techniques dedicated to achieving higher states and mystical experiences. Ecstasy (*ex-* 'out' and *histanai* 'to stand') is the state available to anyone sincerely devoted to getting out of their heads and overcoming their boundaries. Occam's experience of the divine was much more intimate than words and theories, more important to him than politics and material concerns, including his safety. He was looking in on the illusion from outside.

What were all those monks from Shaolin to Santiago de Compostella doing with their time? Did they observe vows of poverty and silence for kicks? Did they pray all night or sit shivering under waterfalls because they had nothing better to do? Since the dawn of civilisation, people have been worshipping, praying, singing, sacrificing, and confessing to something invisible, but recently we been consumed by the delusion that there is nothing greater than the tiny slice of life that fits on a microscope slide. Materialistic culture rejects mystical techniques and experiences with tremendous arrogance. If scientific paths to wisdom are so much better, why all the imperfection in our scientific world? Meditation has all but fallen away in the Judeo-Christian tradition in the developed world. Humming along at church on the odd weekend is all very well, but lacks the depth of the traditional Christian meditations, and Madonna meditates on the kabbalah far more than most of the Jews at my synagogue, including the rabbi.

Many seekers prefer to go east, to the daddy of godless metaphysics. The Buddha taught more psychology than religion, and he did it without walking on water or knobbing thousands of milkmaids. At the centre of the story is a normal man at his wits end, sitting under a tree and refusing to move until he had worked out what was troubling him. There are gods, 'garlanded with black serpents and fresh skulls', but they are recognised 'as the form of your own mind',⁶ along with everything else in the universe. Fantastic local legends were incorporated, but they are no more true than the rest of the illusion.

The Buddha invites his followers to disregard anything they disagree with:

Do not go upon ... tradition; nor upon rumor; nor upon what is in a scripture; ... nor upon another's seeming ability; nor upon the consideration, 'The monk is our teacher.'... 'When you yourselves know: 'These things ... lead to harm and ill,' abandon them.'⁷

With this sentiment, the Dalai Lama at a lecture I attended poked fun at a Buddhist scripture describing the sun as a few feet across. Opinions are to be based on experience in Buddhism, and the Buddha mind is without opinion, but this is not immediately feasible for most of us, so the Buddha recommends non-attachment as a steppingstone on the way. We can work with theories and opinions, whilst remaining at liberty to ditch them when something better arises. With non-attachment and constant vigilance, we can escape the drunken brawls of the beer-tent.

Freed from the tyranny of the gods and the weight of hand-me-down cosmology, Buddhists developed some of the best techniques for exploring the immense scope of the inner world. Meditation is a most scientific of disciplines, and its results are more directly knowable than anything in the mundane sciences. A chemist watching a reaction observes a colour change and a moving needle on a thermometer. He infers that heat has been produced and a new compound formed, and from there he speculates further as to what is happening to the ions, but what is an ion other than a tiny speck of speculation swimming in wavy gravy? All a scientist actually knows is that the needle moves, or that data fills a computer page.

With meditation, the jumpy needles of the experimenter's own apparatus gradually settle, and the page becomes blank. As she repeats her investigations, she gradually develops focus, balance, and calm, and she also finds herself cushioned from the stress of burnt toast and other everyday irritations. There may be no great revelation, but then who ever found the meaning of life inside a test-tube? Theories are interesting and discoveries can enrich our lives, but scientific theories

have been used to justify the oppression of both women and other races, and sometimes the fruits of science contaminate rivers for decades. Science cultivates data and knowledge, but not necessarily the wisdom to use it.

Meditation can also do something quite surprising. If the seeker perseveres, then one day, quite suddenly as she pours a cup of tea or glances out of the window, she may find that the world suddenly melts into harmonious unity. This happened to me during a dinner party in Japan with my Aikido class, as my friend leaned forward to take a piece of meat from the grill. Somehow the tremor of his chopsticks, his stuttering speech and general nervous disposition came together, along with the quiet air of authority surrounding sensei at the head of the table, the smell of the food, the sound of two young karaoke crooners in the background, and everyone and everything there, including the straw mats, the sliding doors, and including me. It all blended into a scene of transcendental normality. For about two minutes I chewed on a grilled pepper in a state of complete bliss, high as a kite but totally present. It was one of the strangest things that ever happened to me, but nothing happened.

This experience is not unusual, it happens to non-meditators as well, and it is momentous. The question 'what can we know?' becomes irrelevant; you have glimpsed the cosmic dance-floor, and you just know. Everything you see is grooving to the pulse of the universe under the party lights of the Milky Way. Everything in existence is another disco dancer doing their thang, with continental plates traversing the floor in a slo-mo tango, seasons switching the visuals, protons and electrons spinning in clinches of desperate affinity, strands of DNA swapping juicy secrets, doing the twist again and again and again. This moment is the philosopher's stone, which transmutes every mundane experience into gold. From that moment onwards, nothing can ever be the same again. I stepped up to sing another *Carpenters* classic a completely new man.

The highest goal of mundane science is a theory to bring together everything in the universe. Newton made a good attempt with his theory of gravity, the first principle governing apples falling at the local scale and planets orbiting at the astronomical. Newton, however, was no mundane scientist. He practiced the illegal art of alchemy, and only managed to avoid trouble by keeping a 'high silence' concerning his passion.⁸ He restated Occam's razor as one of the foundations of science, directing the Royal Society 'to admit no more causes of natural things, than such as are both true and sufficient to explain their appearances.'⁹

Galileo Galilee, whose very name is an opera of extravagance, was less tactful, and he came into conflict with the authorities. Pioneers rarely escape controversy, because the mind which devotes itself to the order of the beer tent is a small mind, a political mind which finds its way into positions of power behind the bar, where it is most comfortable serving another round of the usual to its regulars. Whilst the closed-minded fear that Occam severs the hands of the mind, the wide-eyed see that it cuts away that which lies between them and true understanding. Science grows along the wound made by Occam's razor. Truly revolutionary ideas rarely result from beavering away in labs, tapping computers and totting up tables; revelation comes when the rational mind is bypassed. The following chapter goes into how meditation has given insights pre-empting science by thousands of years, and that our greatest scientific leaps forward have occurred in dreams and trances, whilst sick in bed or fried on drugs. The rational mind wields the razor to choose between models, but this is secondary to the creative, non-rational processes of the unconscious.

For most scientists and the rest of us inebriates, however, Occam's razor cannot help. Rather than slashing the ropes of the tent, we remain at the bar toasting our achievements and our potency, fighting amongst ourselves as we down theory after theory, getting lost whenever nature calls. Look closely into the dregs in your glass. The kegs are running dry and spitting foam. The bell for last orders rang decades ago. The lights are flicking on and off, and a nasty hangover is brewing. It is time to drag our sorry selves back home, and have a good think about what we have been doing.

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- 1 The Logic of Scientific Discovery - Karl Popper
 - 2 Letters of the Abbey of Saint-Joseph de Clairval, March 1st, 1999
 - 3 From the National Abortion Federation website
 - 4 *The Gay Science, Book III* - Nietzsche, F, p. 108
 - 5 Cooper p. 65
 - 6 *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* - (Chogyam Trungpa trans.)
 - 7 *Kalama Sutta* - (Soma Thera trans.) (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1981)
 - 8 *The Forge and the Crucible: The Origins and Structures of Alchemy* - Mircea Eliade (Stephen Corrin trans.) (Chicago, 1978) p.231
 - 9 *The Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy* - Isaac Newton (London, 1729) (Motte, A. trans.)