

Final Reflection  
“Guilt is Inevitable While Existing in this System”

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## INTRODUCTION

Countless disasters and hopeless pleas, it seems unquestionable that tragedy carries in the heart of many. I know I have carried the belief of guilt for simply existing as myself with my privileges and opportunities, as if mere luck to have been born in the right home in my torn country. To express it now, to dedicate 28-days of objective observations and connect to factual studies, I have learnt that emotional beliefs have merit, but more impactful with realistic qualifications. My position expresses an emotional narrative I have held for years. Fortunately, the journaling process has revealed a new objective dimension, allowing depth in each element of the statement and finding hope with possible change for existing:

*Guilt is inevitable while existing in this system.*

**GUILT:** *I Curse the Society that Nurtures Me.*

Guilt finds its way in every action I take. There is impact on people and resources over every decision, action, or defiance of either. It seems impossible for me to be fully happy when aware of my life's existence mostly due to unethical practices or exploitation of people or nature. The guilt is sewn in every action because of society's inevitable lead to destruction or waste that my existence will cause as another player in this system. This begins emotionally in my own narrative, but is noticeable in objective forms of observations or sociological studies.

“After two centuries of ascendancy, capitalism is shown up as only one way to make society into an industrial apparatus” (Mills). The system's goal is to produce to progress to profess its power. Individually, we surrendered our power to governments then surrendering to corporations. No doubt this maximizes the efficiency of resource-use and population-utilization. But it means “society has placed in [corporate leaders'] hands the responsibility for mobilizing and organizing society's resources” (Vogel, “Political”). With corporations' unique relationship to public welfare

and society's belief of "an economy that allows each person to succeed through hard work [...] to lead a life of meaning and dignity," the meritocratic society with corporations are persons emerged (Fitzgerald). The tenet of the industrial society was that profits were reward for businessmen who "successfully fulfill[ed] the legitimate expectations of others" (Vogel, "Business"). Within a market, there is sustainable competition with value creation as an individual acquired wealth that "did not harm other people, but actually benefitted them" (Vogel, "Business").

Capitalism had ethical roots when value creation was emphasized. Now, the ability to transfer wealth in zero-sum games exploitation positions of power is the issue. It is true that we can do good for society simply by doing what we do well, but understanding that "every profession produces both private returns and social returns" which some providing a surplus of private instead (Mullainathan). Breeding corruption is simple when powerful corporations have the collective's trust. When they start acting morally or implementing corporate responsibility practices, they begin to ask for rewards. Should they expect to be rewarded for acting moral "person?" There is the responsibility to "conduct business in accordance with their desires [...] while conforming to the basic rules of the society" (Friedman) but now is represented as CSR, arguably inadequate. It is a program "deeply embedded in globalization, deregulation and a free-market economy" that, as I mention later, work out to be an ineffective solution to resolving inequality (Yakabuski). Essentially, "medieval economic thought continues to exercise on our collective moral imagination" (Vogel, "Business") as I overhear students worrying about their career prospects and contribution to society that is leading to their restless nights and angry protests (Lama, "STAIRWELL").

**INEVITABLE:** *(Failed) Methods to Equalize Inequality*

Guilt seems unavoidable because it finds itself at the end of every choice available. An unintended consequence is inevitable in the complexity of our globalized systems circuitry for the cheapest process possible. Whether I decide to purchase an item or not (Lama, “GROCERY”), I am still causing some effect in the market, most likely leading to some negative impact. Strung in my own narrative, guilt is inevitable. However even through observations, I notice guilt as a natural resultant from the current structure of our society. Even through possible trials of equalizing inequality, we are left with the issue at hand: inequality is inevitable.

To begin, the system I refer to must be described in its 3 foundational elements:

1. **Cartesian Split:** “We humans control the world because we live in a dual reality” and can “create and believe fictions” with money being the “most successful story ever invented and told by humans” (Harari). This dual reality is the ability to separate natural systems and believe one aspect of the system does not affect the other if disturbed. “Reductionist thinking is rapidly becoming seen as simply an error of early science” (Suzuki and Dressel). Descartes’ separation of mind and matter allowed humans to categorize processes as good/bad, true/false, and right/wrong. This is elemental in separating man from nature in terms of observer/observed or owner/owned.
2. **Ownership Rights:** At a café, I order a coffee sourced from Kenya and am presented with the notes of the flavour, chalked on the board completely isolated from the impact of the source or any notes on the ethical processing of the supply (Lama, “CAFE”). Yet, I do not outwardly question it because I believe its public existence solidifies any doubts over possible unethical production. This simplifies any ethical dilemma I might have over the ownership rights of the café that supplies those beans. By believing nature’s resources are

available to the first person who can efficiently optimize the resource for monetary benefit, this society allows humans to do what they please. As long as the end (monetary benefits) justifies the means (ethical issues), the system accepts the process: “capitalism is a system in which morally suspect intentions combine to produce morally beneficial results” (Vogel, “Business”).

3. **Invisible Hand:** Furthermore, the “relationship among economic actors is essentially based on selfishness” (Vogel, “Business”). The belief that optimal markets are possible through pursuing individual rewards incentivizes business opportunities irrelevant of unethical or unsustainable methods.

There have been methods to equalize inequality; however, none deemed successful.

1. **Resource Distribution:** a small-scale manual work ending in absurdity while acting as a band-aid solution such as equalizing disabilities in Vonnegut’s *Harrison Bergeron* or heroic missions to save the poor like Monty Python’s Dennis Moore.
2. **Rewards Cap:** a large-scale manual work requiring constant management making it inefficient long-term. For instance, “rebuilding a democratic economic order” by capping incomes for elites to “reclaim its leisure in exchange for a reduction of income and status” and middle class regaining “its income and status” (Markovits). Capping the extremities of insane incomes to preserve happiness is supported by the Easterlin Paradox (Firebaugh and Schroeder). However, this method goes against the dignity of meritocracy and the work of individuals in the tragedy of the commons.
3. **Trade Liberalization:** a large-scale automatic work still leads to corruption by the 1% who take advantage of mismanaged systems like the East Asia Crisis (Stiglitz 2002). It

seems any method of equalizing inequality falls flat while still operating within our system's structure.

With inevitable inequality, "man's chief danger' today lies in the unruly forces of contemporary society itself, with its alienating methods of production, its enveloping techniques of political domination, its international anarchy" (Mills). Every solution leads back to the issue, an inefficient process, or an absurd situation. Our current choices are the simplest realizations of our designed system, and there is no better option until we notice the fault at our foundational beliefs.

**EXISTING:** *Freedom vs. Obligation / Self vs. Society / In vs. Out*

I depend on society for the opportunities and resources it has and still provides, but at the price of following their rules. I have predetermined obligations to fulfill that might go beyond my morals. Whether I feel guilty or not, I have to do them or risk being punished by lack of societal support: "Responsibility is the product of definite social arrangements" (Hardin). Even as I sit on my friend's couch during the weekend to rest, I feel a gnawing feeling to do something more. It can be working on a project, finishing an essay, or even reading non-fiction instead of fiction (Lama, "COUCH"). There is guilt to be doing more, to be constantly providing for the system that provides so much for me at the expense of many others. I cannot help but feel emotionally toiled for inhabiting the "buildings built by anonymous (plural) for future people like [me]" (Lama, "STREETS"). Knowing my existence is supported by plentiful processes using cheap resources to sustain my North American lifestyle forces me to do more with my spare time, even on Saturday evenings on my friend's couch.

Our modern life of globalization, environmental crises, and humanitarian issues further bleed into the awareness of our private lives: "What ordinary men are directly aware of and what they

try to do are bounded by the private orbits in which they live [...] And the more aware they become of ambitions and of threats which transcend their immediate locales, the more trapped they seem to feel” (Mills). We can overwork or make greener choices, but risk enacting Jevons Paradox (Zink and Geyer). Or we decide to retire our individual morals and “adapt” to society. We rationalize our existence for the progression of our system that simultaneously kills individual freedom for environmental destruction: “alienated from production, from work, [the adapter] is also alienated from consumption, from genuine leisure” (Mills). It disturbs me, the balance of internal peace and external comfort. I find it hard to “balance in and out,” as if mind and matter can be separated Cartesian-style to build my “self-portrait” (Lama, “BATHROOM”).

**SYSTEM:** *Cartesian Split vs. Ecological Mindset*

Our Western Capitalistic system is built off the major success of categorizing processes and resources, helping disassociate functions for ownership and ease of understanding. This is the shortcut to owning and selling without resistance by others through hard work and ownership in meritocracy and trade liberalization. Quick ownership allows quick turnover to quick money to quick resource use to depleting resources to an unstable system. Our system has worked this long by cheapening labour and environment before they tipped the system into catastrophic events. Now with the magnitude of this system infiltrating every aspect of our daily lives worldwide, it is hard to separate my actions from the negative impacts of these systems. There is guilt no matter what I do, whether I avoid buying coconut water (Lama, “GROCERY”) or spend my nights productively (Lama, “ALL\_NIGHTER”).

If we want to change the course of our existence, we need to change our system’s mindset. Our existence is sacrificed, not resilient nature. This is the idea of revolutionizing our capitalistic

society. With Natural Capitalism or New Growth, the concept is mimicking nature's ecological systems for our economic models. As I watch our polluting smoke rise from our school buildings to join "Nature's great water migration," I see a dark paradox: the pollution is a result of housing knowledge and innovation for the improvement of our society (Lama, "LIBRARY"). Paul Hawken asks how different our lives would be if "our economy were organized not around the lifeless abstractions of neoclassical economics accountancy but around the biological realities of nature" (Suzuki and Dressel). The real issue is corporate capitalism keeps profits and dumps costs (Monbiot). At our point, these externalities are threatening the end of our system's normal functioning. There must be change "moving from broad notions of preserving nature and appeals to beauty to a more concrete analytic framework provided by the idea of human sustainability" (Gibson).

Nature represents more than just beauty; it is an efficient system that is observed and observing, not just humans' observation and exploitation over it. I watch squirrels tumble in leaves and notice their role in the forest (Lama, "TREES"). I walk the neighbourhood and find trees blending into the surrounding buildings as if "built with the buildings behind" (Lama, "WALK"). There are intricate and efficient natural systems that we can model our system after. As I observe nature, I see not what can be changed in our own system, but how subjective my thoughts are as they are strung in my own narrative of guilt-ridden society vs. sublime nature. Here is another instinctual perspective that is not objectively true; however, the elements that have raised my perspective exist and are proven with my sociological study of the system. Nature as pure beauty and resource pool is not the absolute truth, yet is the belief naturally arises from observing the actions of our system.

## CONCLUSION

Through my process of journaling over observations for 28-days, I have accepted my original position with specific qualifications, further strengthening my point but in a more hopeful manner. Previously, I believed that guilt was inevitable in existence as a whole. This existential idea would be hard to dissuade in life, let alone a single essay. Additionally, my admiration of nature in journals “FIELD” and “TREES” make clear my awe for witnessing living systems. But I always explained the system through my own narrative. As a self-proclaimed writer and romanticist, I often poetical overdo my experiences. However, writing objectively over daily observations was relieving. It allowed me to abandon my spiralling thoughts by bringing myself back into the “real” world. I could observe a movement or conversation and analyze it only to one degree. Any further degrees would eliminate the objective nature of my observations and lead to the infiltration by my own narrative. This distinction clarified a major qualification attached to my position:

*Guilt is inevitable while existing in this system, if and only if it is within your own narrative to feel that way.*

Guilt is not inherent in existence, at least it is not an existential issue for myself. My conflict lays in the awareness of my partaking in this society that leads to the consequences I live my life to solve. It seemed futile to continue attempting to solve the issues if my simple existence lead to the creation of these issues. But by simply understanding my disposition to feel guilt with the aspects of our current system, I see that it is not inevitable. And that gives me hope.

It gives me hope seeing, finally, that there is a way to exist without guilt while actively improving society. There is a way to integrate nature’s processes into our current system without stunting growth, but encouraging a new type of growth providing sustainable and realistic

happiness in our changing world (Elgin). We are beginning to see “capitalism [...] embedded in more fundamental belief systems that [were] largely beneath the surface of our awareness” (Eisenstein). We understand the global environmental and humanitarian issues are linked to the flaws of our system’s structure. It is time to rewire our system. We can look to nature for inspiration, more than a landscape to admire or cornucopia to extract. With Natural Capitalism, we can run businesses for current stakeholders and future generations (Lovins et al.). With natural systems and resource regeneration, we can progress society in terms of depth instead of accumulation, “the deliberate and voluntary reduction of wants” alone promoting “real happiness and contentment” (Elgin). There is hope in our changing world to witness what our current system has been built to do, and realize it will not survive unless we connect it again to the nature’s systems, and not human matter or human mind.

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