



Friday, Jan 3



Done

I seem to have gone too far with the chocolate just now. The past hour and a half or so I've been a useless blob, jumping mindlessly back and forth between Reddit and YouTube. Something's up with the dopamine.

Just blocked Reddit and YouTube. We'll see what that does. Maybe I also take the work computer down so I can have another one of those "productive Saturdays" where I try to get things done? The food is certainly in place for that sort of thing, and the weather.

The main thing to look out for here would be [REDACTED] commandeering the whole day just to do some paperwork. I need to be ready not to say no to him, per se, but to reduce what he needs to get done to the bare essentials so I have time to do other things. What would take a group of us multiple hours to do on a call can be done by myself in isolation in maybe twenty minutes. Indeed, we saw this last night with my proposed edits to his [REDACTED].

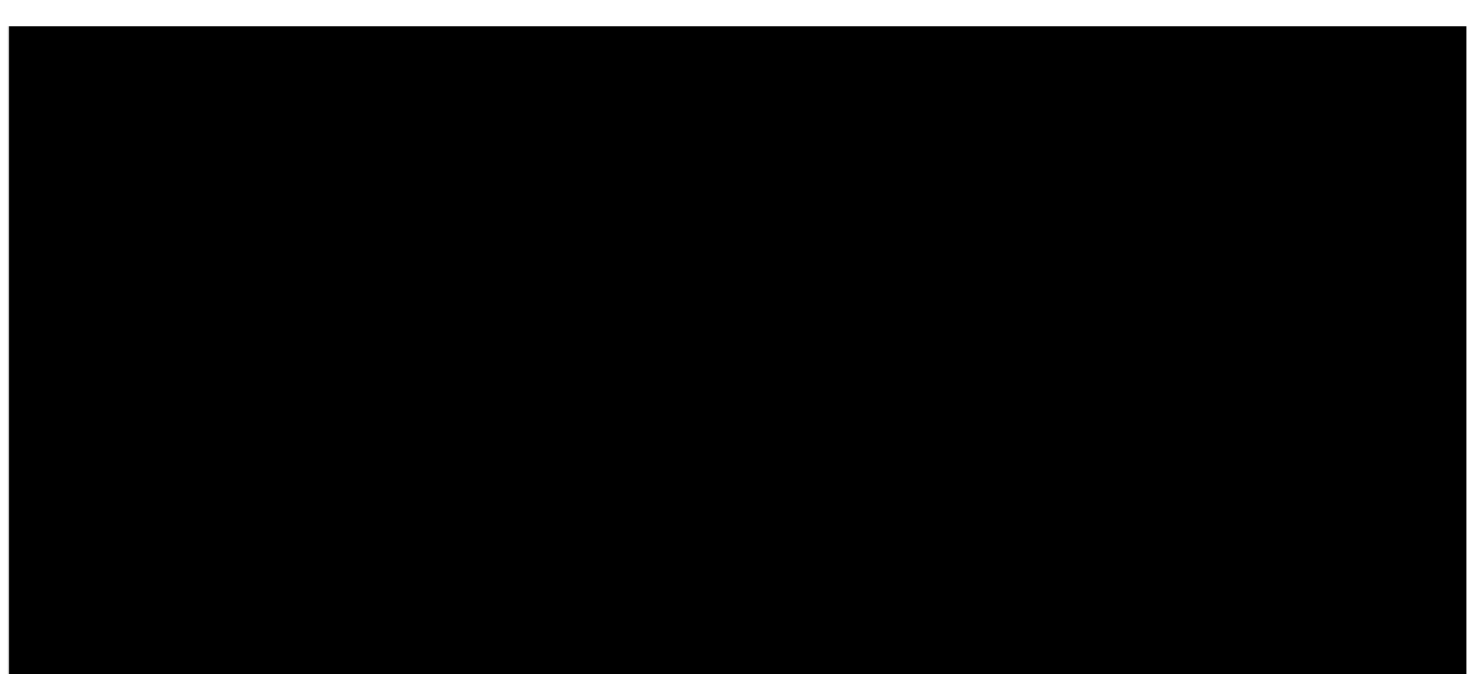
Thinking about it some more, this could be caffeine brain I'm experiencing. Right now, there's this desire to have "lots of little thoughts" - not a small number of big thoughts. It reminds me of [REDACTED], and it may have something to do with norepinephrine levels. When in such a

state, organization and logistics beckon. I'm talking things like: finally vacuuming and dusting, buying all those little things I've been meaning to buy (more socks and underwear, canola oil, sponges), and organizing all the things I've written.

You know, that's it. Let's look at that box of Papa photos. It's begging to be organized.

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Actually no, that's not it. Organizing the photo box is some combination of useless and overwhelming. Far more practical, I reckon, would be a general strategizing session for the year 2025. Ideally, I'll be living somewhere completely different by the end of the year, and I'll be in the midst of finishing the Harvard degree. What concrete steps would need to be taken in order to make this happen?



[REDACTED]

That right there - the resume update - would be a big move. Because at that point I'd be able to throw it on that [REDACTED] thing and open up the possibility of a completely different sort of work at [REDACTED].

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I'm wondering at this point if some sort of formalization of the "caffeine brain" sensation is possible. Well, here we go...

Each *activity* performed by a human can be a source of satisfaction in one (or both) of two ways. First, it can be satisfying *in itself*. Second, it can be satisfying *as a stepping stone* to achieving some goal. In my experience, caffeine gears an individual away from the aesthetic "first mode" of enjoyment and towards the goal-oriented "second mode" of enjoyment.

Interestingly, two popular British bands got at this dichotomy a number of decades ago. At the beginning of *The Dark Side of the Moon*, Pink Floyd contrasts the aesthetic existence ("Breathe, breathe in the air / Don't be afraid to

care") with the goal-oriented existence ("Run, rabbit, run / Dig that hole, forget the sun"). At the end of *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, meanwhile, the Beatles have Lennon embodying the lackadaisical, aesthetic existence ("I read the news today, oh boy") and McCartney embodying the anxious, goal-oriented existence ("Woke up, fell out of bed / Dragged a comb across my head"). In this latter song (which makes an implicit reference to caffeine), the aesthetic and goal-oriented existences are punctuated by cataclysms of sound - as if the two states are truly unintelligible to one another, with moments of abject confusion marking the transition from one state to the other. It's kind of like how Dissociative Identity Disorder posits moments of "dissociation" to mark the transitions between personalities - or how a veritable No Man's Land rests between the two Koreas.

[On the subject of "British musical acts pretentious teenagers will inevitably begin listening to after googling "best bands ever", one may wish to fit Radiohead into the above narrative. Though I couldn't find an exact fit, "Paranoid Android" has a manic section contrasting with an ethereal slow section. While this song *does* seem to get at the sympathetic/parasympathetic nervous system dichotomy, it does so in a way more indicative of bipolar disorder than of run-of-the-mill human behavior. I'll also note that "The

National Anthem" and "How to Disappear Completely" off of *Kid A* play out a similar run of emotions, only this time over the span of two songs instead of one.]

To brainstorm some other examples of this divide cropping up in my life:

- Some hikers are what you would call "peak baggers." Their goal is to get to the top of a mountain in an efficient manner, check the mountain off the list, and move on to the next one. If they get up early enough (which they really seem to enjoy doing), they can knock out a whole bunch of peaks in a single day. The goal of such hikers is a feeling of accomplishment.
- Other hikers (like myself) sleep the hell in, don't hit the trail until 3:00 PM, stop for every goddamn mushroom they come across, and won't hesitate to hike a minor mountain for the fifth time if that's what the "vibe" calls for - even if there are plenty of untouched mountains remaining on the list. The goal of *these* hikers is a feeling of first-order fun.
- Go watch videos of these peak bagger people on YouTube. They all seem to be big into caffeine. As for me, I avoid the stuff before hitting the trail.
- Paul Erdos and Alexander Grothendieck were two titans of 20th Century mathematics, and in some sense they epitomized radically different styles. While

I would have to do some research to uncover Grothendieck's relationship with caffeine, I *do know* that Erdos was a fiend for the stuff. Later in life, in fact, he moved to amphetamines because caffeine wasn't strong enough for him.

- The style of Erdos - which we may call the elementary or analytic style - centers on *the virtuosic manipulation of a limited number of objects*. Here, the working memory is pushed to the limit while the long-term memory gets to relax; a limited vocabulary that requires little initiation to acquire is used to do some very, very complicated things. With Erdos, we see an affinity for easily understood combinatorics problems, and for bits of intellectual acrobatics like an elementary proof of the Prime Number Theorem.
- The style of Grothendieck - which we may call the definition-oriented or abstract style - centers on *the simple, and in some cases inevitable, manipulation of a large number of objects*. Here, the working memory gets to relax as the long-term memory is pushed to the limit; a conscientiously constructed tower of definitions that requires many hours of study to master is effortlessly deployed to give "canonical" proofs of theorems. With Grothendieck, we see an affinity for problems that cannot be explained to the layman, and for progress on so-called "important theorems."



- [I say this all as someone who bombed some undergrad math classes but also got A's in some others. This may not matter much, however; one need not be in the NFL to explain the difference between Tom Brady and Lamar Jackson's quarterbacking styles.]
- So the Erdos approach takes the existing mathematical objects for granted and tries to manipulate them in a way that will solve the problem at hand. It is plainly goal-oriented behavior. The Grothendieck approach, meanwhile, creates entirely new mathematical objects from scratch. In this latter approach, the newly invented mathematical objects may end up being more interesting than the problems motivating their creation. Insofar as the Grothendieck approach requires a willingness to truly think outside the box, it requires a more curious, aesthetic bent.
- Alright, hiking and math. That's two. I'll add one more.
- In his infamous manifesto, Ted Kaczynski argued that the Industrial Revolution has been a "disaster for the human race" by virtue of its interrupting the normal goal-setting mechanisms of humans. As Kaczynski saw it, the human brain was evolved to find satisfaction in achieving the petty logistical tasks of day-to-day existence - acquiring food and water, constructing one's own shelter, etc. To the extent that industrialization has made

these goals trivially easy for people to achieve, Kaczynski believed life has been robbed of its essential drama and dignity.

- Now, if Kaczynski had been the true survivalist he was purported to be, there wouldn't have been any caffeine in that shack in Montana. Nevertheless, he strikes me as a particularly pure example of a goal-oriented individual.
- One of the most common rebuttals to Kaczynski's manifesto (coming right after "Why are we listening to a jerk who mailed bombs to people?") is that he failed to understand the aesthetic component of existence. That is, he went all out discussing one side of the dichotomy I've been expositing here and just sort of forgot about the other. Indeed, if Kaczynski's framework is to be believed, something as profound as Beethoven's Ninth Symphony would be a mere "surrogate activity" - a pointless diversion created by Beethoven once his basic survival needs were met.
- I'll end by mentioning another rebuttal to Kaczynski's Manifesto - this one transcending entirely the dichotomy presented in this entry. In addition to craving *achievement* and *pleasure*, humans also crave *community*. That is, we like not only to see ourselves achieving and enjoying things, but also to see those we care about achieving and enjoying things. Needless to say, the Unabomber



- was lacking in this empathic component.
- Actually one more thing, to come full circle. In the reprise to "Breathe" that comes at the end of the track "Time," *The Dark Side of the Moon* introduces a third mode of existence analogous to the "community" motivation just mentioned. Here we have the lyrics, "Home, home again / I like to be here when I can." Immediately following this is talk of church attendance.

