

The Natural Order of Things

‘Sit down. This is what will happen. You will find a hare, a leveret, with ants swarming on its fresh-fur body, in your front yard. It won’t even stir as it sits there near the grass growing through the cracks in the concrete. Even though it will wail like a baby might when you pick it up, it won’t run when you put it back down.

“‘Maybe it’s blind?’” you will think. “‘It must be sick, it must be dying.’” You will douse it in water to rid the ants. They will jerk their bodies and kick their tiny ant legs.

‘At this point, you can do one of two things: you can leave it there, you can leave it to the natural order of things, or you can bring it into your home. But then you’ve tampered with it. You’ve tampered with the natural order of things.

‘You will choose the first. You don’t want to tamper with the natural order of things, do you? Of course you don’t. But haven’t you already? You picked the thing up and poured water over it. Doesn’t that then make it the simulation of a hare left to die or to be taken and then eaten by a bird or who knows what?

‘What were you thinking? What have you done?’

‘Let’s go back. Let’s not pick the thing up. Let’s not douse it in water.

‘But that’s not enough. We need you to pretend you never noticed it sitting there on the concrete, with the swarming ants on its body, not even stirring. It might notice you noticing it. Wait, not even that. We need you to have actually never seen it sitting there on the concrete, with the swarming ants on its body, not even stirring. But what if it were, as you asked yourself, born blind? Then it would never have seen you notice it sitting there on the concrete, with the swarming ants on its body, not even stirring. No. That doesn’t work because it may have sensed your presence in another way. Perhaps it heard you.

‘To be safe, I think it’s best you never notice it.

‘We’ll provide a distraction of sorts for you. We can do that. Perhaps a flash in the sky... But then that might not be enough, it might be too brief, especially given the limited attention span and general lack of curiosity you have. How about some skywriting? Something like:

‘DISTRACTION HERE’. It will be placed within your line of vision as you walk out the front door. That should do the trick.

‘However, if you’re clever enough, you might seek out what you’re supposedly being distracted from. Also, if the hare isn’t blind, it might be distracted by this. No, I’m not suggesting it would understand the skywriting, although we haven’t ruled that out. I’m just saying the skywriting is something it might look at that it previously couldn’t have, and we can’t have that.’

The white lab coat pauses. The others at the table sit silently.

It continues:

‘We must find a way to affect the way you act without affecting it. You are the problem here. We can send you these recommendations, but we can’t just adjust you entirely. We don’t have the capacity for that, at least not yet.

‘We’ll have to remove you. Go back to an earlier point in your life then eradicate you. You can’t cause any harm or tamper with the natural order of things if you don’t exist.

‘But if we were to do that wouldn’t there just be some other person, or some other people, living in your house? Or their house? And then wouldn’t the whole scenario be threatened by this different person or these different people? The whole thing will be set up, and therefore play out, entirely differently. Heaven knows what kind of front yard they might have.

‘We’ll have to create another version of you, a robot, which does everything exactly as you have up until this point. We’ll put it in your place once we’ve gone back and eliminated you. You might as well be a machine anyway, the way you’re living. But yes, that seems achievable. We’ll just have to closely monitor your life from the point we go back to onwards so that we can get the robot to replicate it.

‘We’ll have to dispose of your body as well, of course. We’ll be creating a real situation for ourselves if we don’t do that. That shouldn’t be too difficult. Even if your body is found, it shouldn’t be traced back to you. You’ll still appear to be alive. The robot will be about, walking for you.

‘We’ll program it to never enter the front yard on this particular day, as well as for some days to come, to make sure the natural order of things remains. It will stay indoors and go about your regular business, except for those things that require it to leave home—going to work, getting the mail, whatever it is that you do.’

The white lab coat stops speaking. It raises its head slightly as if it is having a thought.

‘Waiter, grab us another pot of coffee, I think I’m onto something here,’ it says.

The waiter, who is standing in a shadowy corner of the room, walks up to the table and removes the coffee pot. They leave.

‘But why stop here?’ says the white lab coat. ‘We could roll these things out in droves. These people have started to become so unnatural, so far from the living things around them, that it would certainly be better for them all to be machines, harmlessly sitting around at home making sure this mess doesn’t get any worse. They could even use that time to work on fixing it. Oh what a task! But let’s not delve into that right now, we’ll have to save it for another time, my comrades.’

‘À qui parles-tu?’ says Baudrillard,¹ or ‘Who are you talking to?’

Baudrillard is seated on the white lab coat’s left. In this room, the French speakers hear English as French and the English speakers hear French as English.

‘The hypothetical person sitting in that chair,’ says the white lab coat while pointing at the only empty chair around the table, which is on his right. ‘Although in reality, it is not possible for this hypothetical person and I to have this pre-emptive discussion concerning these future events.’

‘Nous sommes ici, mais pourquoi?’ Deleuze and Guatarri² ask in unison, ‘Why are we here?’

Deleuze and Guatarri are seated opposite the white lab coat.

‘Never mind that,’ it replies. ‘We must continue moving.’

The waiter returns with a full pot of coffee. They pick up the milk from the table with their free hand, and then begin circling it clockwise from the white lab coat on, distributing the coffee.

‘But there’s no one sitting in that chair,’ says Baudrillard.

‘Exactly. I wish you’d keep up, Jean. It’s important that you pay attention.’

‘In this chair,’ says the white lab coat, pointing again at the empty chair, ‘is a hypothetical real person, and I am describing hypothetical real events.’

‘There is no real,’ chorus Deleuze and Guatarri reflexively.

Baudrillard joins them, but instead says ‘only the simulacrum is real.’

‘I’m creating the ultimate scenario,’ the white lab coat says. ‘I’m talking utopia.’

Jameson,³ who is sitting one chair away on the white lab coat’s right, with the hypothetical person’s chair in between, takes a bit longer to consider what has been said. He eventually adds:

‘I hope you realise the concept of utopia is exactly that, a concept. It is forever out of reach.’

‘Oh no, this is no utopia I’m trying to achieve, Fredric—Fred? Can I call you Fred?—this is no utopia, Fred. You’re jumping far too ahead. It is nowhere near. It is just the beginning of something that might lead to something like that. And it seems to be working too, the ideas are flowing, yes, indeed they are.’

‘What I’d like to know is what all this robot talk is about?’ says Deleuze. ‘The waiter over there is a robot, right? Where exactly have you taken us? What year is it right now?’

‘Great question, Gilles. So sorry, I just went right into it, didn’t I? There is no time here—well, none of the linear sort—but if you must know, the point I am hypothetically discussing is well beyond your—how shall I put it?—*place* in time.’

‘Robots. Places in time. Derrida with his Decentred Universe!⁴ Things really are so fucking weird!’ says Guatarri.⁵

‘Yes, Félix,’ says Deleuze, ‘but enough of your proclamations. We can discuss all of that later. At the moment we must learn more about what’s going on.’

Deleuze turns back to the white lab coat.

‘So why did you choose the place in time you did?’

‘I studied it and I’ve worked it out. This is the point, the place in time, where we have the best chance of altering the way things turn out. It’s not quite where things begin going completely wrong, but where they start to get taken too far, the beginning of the lead up to the flashpoint, if you will.’

‘Out of curiosity, how do they turn out?’ asks Jameson.

‘Bad. They turn out bad. So very bad.’

The waiter reaches the hypothetical person’s chair and stares at the mug in front of it.

The white lab coat notices and decides to direct them: ‘They’ll have a decaf con panna. Theoretically, of course.’

The waiter lowers their head slightly.

‘That’s right, I said one theoretical decaf con panna, pronto! Or was that not included in your programming? What are you waiting for? Go and get it.’

The men at the table exchange anxious glances.

The waiter places the pot of coffee and milk back on the table. They leave again.

‘Where was I? Yes, we must begin with this tiny hypothetical to work out how we can alter a delicate but powerful sea of hypotheticals, and eventually, must apply this to reality.’

‘Why a leveret swarming with ants?’ asks Jameson, who appears to be the least concerned about the white lab coat’s treatment of the waiter. It does make sense though, him not really being the sort to get riled up about the exploitation of machines.

‘Don’t worry, I know what I’m doing. You wouldn’t understand without a complex and lengthy explanation, which we have no time for, of course. But does it matter, that you don’t get it? As long as I’m right it doesn’t matter. No, not at all. I have given this a lot of thought. It’s logical for it to be so. At least to me it is. Uhh, also, it’s a metaphor. As I said, you’d have to understand how it all works to know, not to mention I’d have to explain the complex time relationship—to put it briefly, how each place in time connects, like there are towns within cities, and then there are the states, continents, a whole globe of places, the universe, multiverse, and so on! Yes, it is right to be so, it must be so.’

Jameson doesn’t respond. He looks at his watch then quickly realises how pointless this reflex is and looks away from it. He sips at his coffee.

‘May I interject?’ says Baudrillard. ‘That is what I’m here for, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, yes, of course, Jean. You’re essential. Absolutely.’

‘Well, frankly, I don’t think you quite understand what I meant by simulacrum...’

‘A3DNSK-2,’ interrupts a smooth voice. It booms from the room’s ceiling.

The white lab coat stands promptly.

‘We spotted your waiter in the tea room just standing there sparking up. We had to reset him remotely and, as is procedure, check in with you to remind you not to deal with the machines in hypotheticals. This information was covered in your first training manual, did you forget?’

The white lab coat shivers.

‘We are glad we did check in with you, because this looks like quite the situation. What are you up to this time? What is going on in here? What did we tell you about hosting unregistered meetings?’

‘Who are these people?’ continues the voice. ‘Is that Jameson? Baudrillard? Deleuze and Guatarri?’

The men’s eyes widen as their names are called out.

‘Oh, yes, I see what is happening. Put these theorists back immediately.’

The white lab coat compresses itself and is now considerably thinner.

‘We’re awfully sorry about this. A3DNSK-2 recently finished its Early 21st Century Arts degree and probably thinks it can use you to change the overarching narrative. Don’t worry. It isn’t the first time this sort of thing has happened.’

The white lab coat begins to stretch out again.

‘Why we let a lab coat study various things of its own choosing I can’t tell you. Let’s just say it was an experiment.’

The white lab coat speaks up—it is no longer erratic but, instead, is measured and sounds as if it is attempting to reason with the voice:

‘Our ways are wrong. How we got here and that we even exist here, outside of time, is wrong. We are a product of this horrific narrative without end that started out beautiful and pure but was progressively tainted, and each glimmer of goodness that was left decreased exponentially, and I cannot, I will not...’

‘Take him away,’ booms the voice, and a noise like the clicking of giant fingers sounds.

Two people wearing black suits covering everything but their eyes walk into the room. One holds a coat hanger.

The white lab coat submits and loses its life, returning to its earlier state.

They grab either end of it and hang it on the hanger. They leave, shutting the door on their way out.

The theorists stare up at the ceiling.

‘Once again, we’re awfully sorry about all this. Now, let’s get you men home.’

¹ French sociologist and philosopher Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007).

² French philosophers Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995) and Félix Guattari (1930-1992).

³ American Marxist philosopher Fredric Jameson (1934-present).

⁴ An idea presented by French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) in his 1988 paper ‘Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences’.

⁵ In reference to Guattari’s own notes, later published in *The Anti-Œdipus Papers* (2006).