THE DEATH ALGORITHM AND OTHER DIGITAL DILEMMAS

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They've become part of everyday life: People who stare at their mobile phones not just when they're sitting in the subway, but while they're walking around the city. Human beings whose "ambient attention" extends only as far as the next obstacle. Any resistance we may mount to such smartphone zombies, or "smombies"—for instance, by defiantly getting in their way as they plod through overcrowded streets—is as futile as it is aggressive. True smombies can avoid running into other people without taking their eyes off their mobile devices. The only consolation is that little bit of schadenfreude we feel when, completely distracted from the real world, they get off the elevator on the wrong floor or head into a bathroom for the opposite sex.

In Hong Kong, where I've lived for a few years, almost every second person is a smombie. Nowhere else have I observed so many people walking through a city with their eyes glued to their cell phones as in this Asian metropolis, despite the great numbers of pedestrians jostling for space on its narrow sidewalks. Amusingly outdated prerecorded warnings can be heard everywhere on subway escalators: "Please hold the hand rail. Don't keep your eyes only on the mobile phone!" Subway escalators are perhaps the only places where pedestrians' obsession with their phones doesn't actually represent a hazard, and guardians of public

safety would be pleased if those were the only places they were used.

But this problem has arrived even in quaint little towns in Switzerland. In May 2015, police in Lausanne attracted attention with a video warning against the potential consequences of sending text messages while walking. "The Mobile Phone in Traffic Trick" is the title of the public service clip. It features a twenty-four-year-old rap and R'n'B fan named Jonas who likes to chat with his friends while on the move. "Jonas doesn't know a thing about magic," a narrator says. "But he's about to disappear. Let's take a closer look." The audience watches as Jonas starts to cross a street while texting. He glances in the wrong direction and gets swept out of the picture frame by a car speeding the opposite way. People scream, and the other pedestrians look horrified. Then the narrator, who turns out to be a mortuary owner, ironically signs off with the words: "See you soon!"[1]

WASTE OF SPACE

The police stage the smombie phenomenon as the sort of fatal traffic accident with which they are all too familiar. But the actual disappearing act happens long before the car smashes into the distracted pedestrian. Smombies treat the distance between point A and point B as merely a stretch of time and remove themselves mentally from the physical world to the parallel universe of social networks. In this sense, they are gone even though they remain physically present. Smombies are not the undead returning from the

grave, but rather the mentally absent who leave their bodies behind.

Is this what irritates us, assuming we are in fact irritated, by seeing people lost in their mobile devices all around us? Do we tacitly hope for someone to interact with us and thus feel disappointed when everyone withdraws so radically? Do we resent them for the solitude they force upon us? Or is it merely aggravating that they have the temerity to expect *us* to get out of *their* way?

It's perhaps less self-pitying to understand smombies' rejection of others as a consequence of media history. Smartphones complete the disappearance of space that began, at the latest, with the advent of modern transportation. The landscape may have rushed by in a blur outside the windows of a train, but it is gone completely when we look out of an airplane. People are suddenly able to travel halfway around the world without ever seeing anything but airports. Bridging distances no longer means encountering space, as anyone who takes the subway in a big city knows. Fundamentally, even a horse-drawn carriage entailed a betrayal of space since it allowed the passenger to withdraw from it, for instance, into the world of a book. As Johann Gottfried Seume, the most famous walker in German literary history, proposed around 1800, the pedestrian is the only one who truly experiences his environment because he can always sit down on a rock at the edge of a field and ask passersby for directions.

Now, with the existence of mobile media and social networks, even pedestrians no longer have to encounter their

surroundings. People wearing Walkmen may have strode around in their own worlds to an extent, but at least they saw the world they no longer wished to hear. By contrast, smartphones reduce space to a distance to a certain destination. Intermediary space is only an interval of time that is actually spent elsewhere: in a social network, on a computer game, on a website, or in a chat with friends. The screens in our hands, like the carriage, the car, the subway, and the train, cause space to disappear. The smartphone is a vehicle.

PLACELESSNESS

A vehicle is what French anthropologist Marc Augé calls a "non-place," akin to shopping centers, highways, and train stations.[2] While they are not places devoid of meaning or characteristics, they are—in contrast to a corner bar in New York or a bistro in Paris—places without history. Their specifics do not develop onsite but are rather imposed globally as a formula. And just like train stations, trains themselves are non-places. The train from Berlin to Munich is neither Prussian nor Bavarian, which is why it can be used equally well to travel from cosmopolitan Hanseatic city of Hamburg to the quaint southwestern German town Freiburg the very next day. Every form of technology is an inhabitable place with its own special culture—McLuhan calls it the "message" of the medium, Heidegger the "essence" of technology.[3] That also goes for pieces of technology we can hold in our hands.

Technology, be it a carriage, a car, a train, or a smartphone, may create non-places, but this process is only

temporary and happens more literally than Augé describes. The smartphone transforms surrounding space into a place that really doesn't exist for people who, engrossed by cyberspace, don't register the cultural specifics of their environment: the structure of the doors of buildings, the graffiti on the walls, the residents, or the special quality of light on a broad street lined with sycamore trees. Space always entails time in the sense of duration. Architectural styles, street names, monuments, and also the destinies entailed by a white rock, the bent slats of a bench, or vehicles making their way on a road—these are all phenomena of times past that space makes appear present to us.

This memory space accompanies the corporeal time. Human beings also preserve the time that psychologically and physically determines us, in everything from the music and books we encounter in our youths to the scars from our first operations or the furrows and wrinkles on our faces with age. When a human being enters a space, instead of merely rushing through it, two biographies encounter one another. Moreover, when a human being is on the go, time moves in space. Human beings are systems of coagulated culture that they bring from point A to point B and leave behind everywhere in between, wherever contact is made with those who live in one place, their progeny, and anyone who follows in their tracks. That is why places in traffic hubs and on trade routes—for instance the Silk Road or Venice—are so vivid and full of meaning.

We sense this synthesis of space and time when we visit foreign cities' cathedrals and squares and ask what

they have to tell us about those specific places' past. Very few of us can resist going to such locations. Tourists traditionally feel a responsibility after having traveled from point A to point B to be able to tell the people in point A what point B was like. But even this behavior is no longer a given. Today people often just post photos to networks of friends who don't expect any further information upon the travelers' return. Space disappears not only when people rush through it without a glance but also when they document it blindly.

THE AVOIDANCE OF CHANCE

Is this an instance of envying the long past of space, which makes our own futures appear terrifyingly short, or is it the desire to take vengeance on everything that will outlive us which encourages us to flee space for the parallel world of mobile devices? Or is it just the fear of the unknown that space offers us? Is the loss of space an incidental by-product of the attempt to avoid chance?

One banal form of this denial or loss is the way GPS navigation robs us of orientation. "In twenty meters, turn left!" What do we know about a space we encounter in this way? Could we retrace our steps if our device lost satellite contact or its battery ran out? In that case, we would find ourselves back in space, forced to orient ourselves around street signs and buildings. We might have to ask others for directions. We would get a feel for our environment. Our problem is that we tend to follow suggestions made by an app rather than go down a street that looks interesting. Our problem is that we've handed over the power to determine

how we encounter space—from the routes we take to the locales (stores, restaurants) we frequent—to technology and the people behind it. Every encounter that is mediated by new technologies initially interposes itself between us and the object to which those technologies are, according to their own logic, connecting us.

No less significant is the loss we undergo when we know a space well and decide, for precisely that reason, to depart from it—when we cheat ourselves not of alternative routes but of alternative experiences. Smombies enact a popular referendum against chance. By staring at their smartphones, they withdraw from the alternatives of space, which may generously send some people or another across their paths, in the hope of starting a conversation, a friendship, or even eventually a marriage. The smartphone becomes the place of chance, in which apps like happn show users which members of certain social networks happen to be in the vicinity. But GPS-based apps organize and doubly constrain chance. For every person we may "encounter" in this fashion, we can check how much we have in common before mounting a "private" approach that the other person will only see if he or she does exactly the same thing.

This app describes itself as a mere social aid: "It all starts in real life." The company's Internet video shows how people happn brings together encounter each other in real space. But the app that acts as though it's only a technological support for chance is essentially a colonization of it. If an app and not space is the mediator, the culture of those who provide the app determines the encounter. That expresses

itself both in the interface that the app provider gives to users to allow them to communicate and in the advertisements with which this communication is surrounded. Anyone who wants to see whom he or she is encountering every day must first see what there is to buy. It is the reversal of the already-reversed situation of an encounter in a real-life market in which one person goes shopping and ends up meeting a love interest by chance.

It's hardly surprising that this app would try to deflect users' attention to commercial ends. After all, this is the whole raison d'être of most apps and social networks that offer their services for free. Nonetheless, this instance of a company monetarizing and capitalizing on human eye contact neatly illustrates where most of the attention withdrawn from real space ultimately ends up. The technologizing of chance diverts our attention to the benefit of consumer culture. Do we take offense at smombies because we believe they're collaborating—unwittingly, passively, or perhaps even actively—with this capitalist model?

THE END OF TRAVEL

"People who only know their own world will think it is the only one there is"—that's one way of formulating what Oscar Wilde called the "dogmatism of the untraveled."[4] The politically significant promise of traveling is that we will gain tolerance of others and reflexive distance from our own world, and no one knows better than great writers that we don't have to go abroad to experience what is foreign. It can also be accomplished by reading books that introduce us to

other worlds or by walking in urban space where a variety of worlds collide. Traveling in this sense isn't a matter of kilometers but the encounters that happen along the way. If difference is only perceived as a shadowy obstacle in our "ambient attention," there are no such encounters. The city loses the cosmopolitan potential that distinguishes it from the conservatism of small towns.

This sort of loss can also happen when the virtual parallel world is a social network. More often than not, despite their global structure, such networks are nothing more than villages in which everyone knows everyone and all think alike, and which only admit outsiders if they assimilate into what is familiar. The filter bubble of being among one's "own" kind negates the possibility offered by public space for personal growth by taking in the completely different experiences and perspectives of the people we happen to encounter. The problem is not the network itself, but how it is generated by means of agreement, liking, and comparing. The problem is the eradication of others. The fate of all communication in cyberspace is to become the object of analysis, monitoring, and consequently optimization in all its various form.

Even that space where people have previously interacted with the world most intensively and primarily is subject to this threat. If online campuses and learning software become the norm, as profit-oriented IT companies and shortsighted politicians hope they will someday, schools and universities will cease to exist as a place of direct encounters and spontaneous experiences. Not only will the

solidarity of traditional school classes and learning groups disappear, so too will the unplanned acquaintances we make at the concerts, readings, open-mic events, and political discussions we happen to attend. We will lose the possibilities for encountering others and experiencing the world in ways that go beyond immediate shared interests and course schedules.

The problem is the algorithms that optimize our capacity for choice, which always followed its own leanings. The more human interaction happens digitally, the more effectively algorithms eradicate chance, and it is no accidental paradox of our times that occasional attempts are made to use algorithms themselves to solve the problem. Algorithms can even be designed to encourage chance. If they so desire, people can let algorithms determine where they'll be living next month, what locales they will frequent, and which people they will meet. But only superficially does this seem like an instance of people using technology to regain what once, in the absence of technology, determined their lives. It's actually an example of fitting square pegs in round holes. What can be more absurd than people who want to open themselves up to chance moving through space in precisely the same way as chance-averse smombies and allowing their smartphones to tell them where they can have accidental encounters?[5]

Nonetheless, even programmed chance is better than the absence of it; at least it involves opening ourselves up to things we don't control. Like public space, programmed chance contains the possibility of us becoming more than

what we are or think we have to become, the possibility of escaping the filter bubble of what we presume to be our own kind and of going beyond time-killing distractions to discover ourselves. Like public space, programmed chance is a refuge of private life, free from inspection and nudging and free for experience and daring. Is it the thoughtless squandering of this refuge that really irritates us about smombies? The frivolous refusal to explore a deeper reserve of possibilities? The inability to pause and consider things while people are on their way between A and B? The fact that they are running away from themselves?

THE POLITICS OF SPACE

In the 1950s and '60s, you would sometimes see people ambling aimlessly around several of the Western world's biggest cities. They were part of a "situationist" performance aimed at breaking through everyday routine and allowing people to see their more or less familiar surroundings in new ways. The point was to politicize the activity of the *flâneur* and use it to expand people's consciousness. This revolutionary strategy was called the *dérive*, a term coined by the situationist Guy Debord who in his famous 1967 manifesto, *The Society of the Spectacle*, attacked the modern emphasis on entertainment and commercialization.

The *dérive* was intended to interrupt people's usual lives and, when put into practice, to lead to *détournement*, "rerouting" or "hijacking," a kind of oppositional appropriation of cultural objects, concepts, and situations. *Détournement* sought to disrupt the seemingly inherent logic and

logical nature of spatial constellation and social interactions in order to critique dominant ideologies. Well-known recent examples include the semiotic kidnappings of Adbuster antiadvertisements or "subvertisements," the politically charged performative pranks of the artist group the Yes Men, and the 18,000 naked people American photographer Spencer Tunick assembled on May 6, 2015, on the world's third-largest city square, the Zócalo at the heart of arch-Catholic Mexico City.

When thousands of Mexican men and women (not counting the tourists who joined the action in solidarity) disrobe in front of the massive edifices of state power (the Metropolitan Cathedral, the National Palace, and the Supreme Court), it is a clear statement against old-fashioned, conservative Mexico. In this action, the Zócalo itself, a traditional spot for sociopolitical demonstrations and proclamations, becomes the object of popular intervention. The unforgettable backdrop it provided for viewers as well as participants was a reminder that any refiguring of the public realm must begin in public.

It's no accident that at a time when media are increasingly interposing themselves into people's interactions with space and other people, political philosophy more and more often equates public space with a place to assemble. The "politics of the street" is a key concept within Judith Butler's "performative theory of assembly," which explores the political potential of physical presence in public space.[6] This entails more than just demonstrating, occupying public parks, or rioting in the streets. It is also about unlocking the

potential for unmediated encounters within public space and the uncontrolled energy it can generate. Ultimately, the point is to perceive reality beyond the digital conditions of communication that threatens to filter out Tunick's naked people—and not only them.

No smombie, of course, would be able to cross even the smallest city square and fail to notice if it were full of naked people. But just as the disrobed participants acting in unison on the Zócalo symbolized the voice of the street, smombies symbolize the silencing of that voice. On the symbolic level, the smartphone is a tool of *récupération*, as the situationists called successful defense against *détournement*: the regaining of the power of definition by making the subversive seem banal or isolating those to which it is addressed. Even if people occasionally use smartphones to arrange to meet for political action, they remain lightning rods that divert public energy and make it harmless.

MAKING THINGS DISAPPEAR

The social significance of various media also resides in the disconnection they initiate. If the smartphone separates us from experiencing the space between point A and point B, it again resembles a vehicle—but this time a helicopter rather than a subway or an airliner. It keeps people apart from others whom they might otherwise encounter when they're on the go, for instance, homeless people, UNICEF volunteers, or others soliciting help. In our ambient attention, all these groups are degraded to the status of objects with which we

need to avoid colliding. Smombies' lack of attention to their environment may lead to the odd individual being erased from the scene (and screen) by a speeding car. But equally tragic is the precondition of such traffic accidents, the smombies' erasure of their environment: the beggar, the money-collecting activist, the stranger, the traffic light and the car.

We need to ask ourselves where our modern media themselves are leading and what future is entailed by the message they communicate. Anyone familiar with countries in which "gated communities" and domestic security guards are part of middle- and upper-class life, keeping the rest of society at bay, will suspect where all this is headed. The smartphone is the helicopter with which even poor people move through space without encountering it. The power of space is thus wiped out for precisely those who need it most. If we consider the possible consequences of eradicating chance and commercializing communication, it is clear that our self-disempowerment begins with a disinterest in public space.

Of course, people can use smartphones to get information about how to support UNICEF or other aid organizations. Of course, people can remove themselves from their social-media filter bubbles or use social media to join political discussion groups. People always have the option of doing something. The question is whether we *have to* behave in some way toward people with whom we *could* occupy ourselves, as is the case when a beggar or a donation solicitor catches our eye or when chance makes us

cross paths with strangers. The question is how many of us do these things if we're given a choice not to.

The smombies' flight from space is a ticking time bomb and could, if we are right about its causes and effects, lead to a future that consists of non-places in which non-people, preoccupied by trivialities, move from point A to point B without seeing anything of whatever remains and probably won't be worth seeing anyway. It is probably this vision of the future that truly angers us when people with mobile phones avoid us without looking up whenever we get in their way.

3 MARSHMALLOW CULTURE

On January 23, 2017, the *New Yorker* ran a cartoon depicting Donald Trump at his inauguration. A man representing the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court extends his hand, which has something in it, and says: "You can eat the one marshmallow right now, or, if you wait fifteen minutes, I'll give you two marshmallows and swear you in as President of the United States."[1] The cartoon calls us back to our childhood: The uncle just showed us a marshmallow and then left the room. If we immediately call him back, we immediately get the marshmallow. If we wait until he returns to the room on his own, we get two marshmallows. The "uncle" was the Austrian-American psychologist Walter Mischel, and the game was part of an experiment he conducted with four-year-old children between 1968 and 1974. In 1980 and 1981, Mischel revisited his subjects and discovered that the ones who were capable of waiting as young children were better developed intellectually and socially than their impatient peers.

The *New Yorker* cartoon presumes that the audience is familiar with the marshmallow experiment as well as with the psychological theories of "present bias" and "instant gratification." These theories hold that human beings favor payoffs that are closer to the present time and don't like to forgo pleasures even in return for future rewards. All of us

have our own experience with this sort of shortsightedness, for instance when we vow to give up smoking or eating sweets and resolve to get more exercise. Other sociological analyses carried out around the same time as Mischel's experiment also classify a desire for instant gratification, blind to the future, as a trait of the "narcissistic personality" who "does not accumulate goods and provisions against the future," as we learn, "but demands immediate gratifications and lives in a state of restless, perpetually unsatisfied desire."[2] The idea crops up in the old saying "A bird in hand is worth two in the bush," and also in literature and television, whenever someone makes a pact with the devil and sells his immortal soul for benefits in the here-and-now. This is precisely the pact that the majority of human beings have made with the Internet.

THE CULTURE OF INSTANT GRATIFICATION

In its early days, the Internet was something users had to wait for patiently to get their reward. Indeed, in 1995, the World Wide Web was known as the "world wide wait" because people could brew themselves a pot of coffee in the time it took between when they dialed their providers with their modems and a connection was actually established. Today we have broadband and 5G. No one is willing to wait more than three seconds for anything on the web—that was Mark Zuckerberg's argument in July 2015 for why newspapers should take part in Facebook's "Instant Articles" service, which posts news on the social network in milliseconds. Millennials seem to have little more

self-control than children. What isn't immediately accessible is disregarded.

But that goes not just for millennials. In an age of overabundant information, impatience also influences the behavior of older people to the point that they too will engage in criminal activities. The main reason people download films or music illegally is not a refusal to pay for it but unwillingness to wait until a movie or song is available through a licensed provider—just as people are no longer capable of waiting for the conclusion of a thought that's longer than a tweet. The Internet encourages a culture of "hyper-attention" and "hyper-stimulation" that privileges instant over delayed gratification. The result is that whenever things get complicated, we immediately click on the next bit of entertainment without the slightest ambition to understand what strikes us as difficult. The Internet is a colossal "now machine." On the Internet, adult subjects would scarcely let Uncle Mischel in the door before they grabbed the marshmallow. It's no surprise than the average human attention span is currently estimated at eight seconds—shorter than that of a goldfish.[3]

A glance at a library or classroom confirms the extent of the problem. With gleaming eyes, their textbooks on the table and smartphones in their hands, students scroll through the updates on their social networks, which promise to be much more amusing than the subject matter of the books they are supposed to understand. The new media make it easy to avoid everything difficult. What chance does a book have against Instagram? What are the prospects of a

serious newspaper article against a salacious bit of fake news? The reverse side to getting everything you want right now is delaying anything that demands an effort: procrastination and instant gratification go hand in hand, as do present bias and confirmation bias.

The problem has become so acute that many people need outside help, such as the WasteNoTime browser extension, to limit the time they can spend on social networks or their favorite website. This form of self-discipline relies on technical means that pay tribute to the source of the problem in the very moment they solve it. We go for gratification now and leave it to the app to discipline us later.

DIALECTIC OF WISH FULFILLMENT

The commercialization and centralization of communication that leaves users at the mercy of giant private companies and government intelligence services aren't the only things that have gone wrong with the Internet. The main problem is that the Internet gives us everything we want: information to suit our own tastes, entertainment without limits, and satisfaction without delay. The problem is one of control not *over* but *by* the individual. The technical terms for this are "customization" and "filter bubbles," into which the algorithms on Facebook and elsewhere increasingly herd us, often without our knowledge but mostly with our consent. What may look like external control is basically a human impulse asserting itself through technology. Just as we impulsively want the marshmallow, we also feel an impulse to keep certain people and certain views at a distance. The

individual here is the perpetrator, not the victim, which doesn't make the situation any easier.

It's no secret that we are our own worst enemies and that achievement is based on overcoming our natural limitations. For that reason, clever athletes seek out tough coaches and trainers. Children, however, aren't so clever. They get upset when their parents don't allow them to order just French fries or play with their mobile phones in restaurants. Conversely, schoolkids prefer "nice" teachers, while cursing those who make them waste weekends reading texts that are much too long and much too complicated. We only appreciate the wisdom and power of such strict taskmasters in delaying gratification later in life—once we have put the classroom long behind us and understand the entire import of Jenny Holzer's unsettling conceptual art project, the bright-light sign, in the middle of billboards and skyscrapers, saying: "Protect Me from What I Want."

The Internet—together with its lackeys, the mobile and social media—is Pandora's gift for our age. It encourages a culture of immediate gratification in which fun is only a mouse click away. The old adage "without perspiration there is no inspiration" has been long forgotten. The "weaklings," to use a term some athletic instructors might deploy, have won the day. In a physical sense, this weakening expresses itself in our decreasing willingness to wait for even short periods when we're in pain, which, supported by the lobbying of the pharmaceutical industry, has led to the massive abuse of medications, at least in America. In times of dwindling readiness to postpone the fulfillment of our desires,

doctors who advocate greater tolerance of pain and professors and journalists who put their faith in complicated books and complex analyses have become little better than irritating spoilsports.

Everything Bad Is Good for You was the title of a groundbreaking book by Steven Johnson from 2005. Its subtitle was *How Today's Popular Culture Is Actually Making Us Smarter*. Johnson's work was a defense of much-maligned pop culture as something actually quite demanding, which the author sought to illustrate using the example of video games and TV series like *The Sopranos* or *The West Wing*. Thirteen years later, however, it is time to turn Johnson's programmatic statement on its head: everything good is bad for you. So-called trash TV, made for viewers who are presumably lowbrow and lower class, may be better than cultural pessimists believe, but the promises of the Internet are also more dangerous than media optimists have been willing to acknowledge. The culture of instant gratification robs us of the endorphins that, in thinking as in sports, are produced only through exertion and endurance. What *feels* good often takes away any chance for us to grow beyond our limitations—as sportspeople, students, or readers.

"You won't know if you like it until you try it," parents sometimes tell young children. How can anyone be induced to try anything in times of antiauthoritarian education and rampant narcissism? We seek to persuade and seduce. The magic formula put forth by today's behavioral researchers and political scientists is called "nudging." People should be nudged toward making correct decisions, whether on

questions of nutrition and physical exercise or in education, choosing a partner, or saving for retirement. Nudging seeks to cure the problem of shortsighted behavior patterns by using a refined "decision-making architecture": tax breaks encourage people to take out private pension plans, and salad, not French fries, is placed up front and thus made more readily available in school cafeterias, public facilities, and wherever therapists rather than drug dealers run the show. Nudging uses the power of inertia as a paradoxical update of the marshmallow experiment. What is good is directly obtainable, whereas what is bad takes some effort.

THE NICE LIFE AS THE WRONG LIFE

The fact that the 2017 Nobel Prize for Economics went to Richard Thaler, a scholar who coauthored a book about nudging, underscores the necessity of researching the conditions and possibilities of delayed wish fulfillment in the age of instant gratification. Thaler and his coauthor Cass Sunstein even promote nudging as an answer to the problems of environmental pollution and the shortage of natural resources, opening up a new perspective. The self-denial we are supposed to engage in to create a better future is no longer directly solely toward our own future but that of all humankind, including people who have yet to be born. This paradigm shift highlights the social and political dimension of individuals forgoing immediate wish fulfillment.[4]

The disciplining of the instincts of the stomach that Mischel's experiment encouraged in the four-year-olds is ultimately a basis for ethical behavior. Delaying gratification

and curbing one's own nature are preconditions of civilization and progress. Wherever external circumstances produce a challenge, the crucial thing is to withstand impulses and remind oneself of what seems rational in the long term. This applies to a difficult text that promises to give readers a deeper understanding of the world, something threateningly foreign that can open our eyes to the diversity of human existence, or the additional effort required to avoid wasting energy and polluting the environment. Little children aren't the only ones who confront the marshmallow problem. It is the central one of humanity. The second marshmallow contains the prospect of human beings being better able to live together.

Adorno's famous adage "There is no right life in the wrong one" from his 1951 collection of aphorisms and essays *Minima Moralia* challenges readers not to accept an unacceptable status quo. We should not allow ourselves to become accomplices to an unjust world and live a "good" life while all around us people are suffering. Adorno calls upon us to show concern, compassion, and solidarity. It is a call that nonetheless makes a right life—or a "livable" one—in a wrong world seem possible, provided that the center of that life is the future, in an expanded sense, and not the present. The determining criterion is not our own satisfaction now but the satisfaction of all people in a future society yet to be created.[5]

The resistance Adorno calls for in this context must begin "within ourselves." It is directed primarily "against what the world has made of us."[6] For four-year-olds, the

world is hardly formed at all. At the same time, they can learn to share sweets or wait until the uncle returns in order to ultimately gain more sweets. No matter whether we're talking about sweets or sociopolitical questions, the struggle against the human impulse to think only of ourselves in the here and now involves issues such as the distribution of wealth, human rights, the problem of refugees, tolerance for those who think differently, and environmental protection. It is about how human beings can live better or at least not worse in the future—as members of society and as inhabitants of planet Earth. Ethical behavior consists of developing an attitude that comes from the future instead of from our own bellies.

Ultimately, the welfare of humankind is a matter of transitioning from "What do I want right now?" to "What is right in the long term?" That presupposes an ability to think ahead while acting in the present and including others in our own concerns. It is a further development of the parental instinct into empathy for our neighbors, compatriots, and foreigners. We need to embrace the world to make something better out of it. The mentality of instant gratification is not only unhealthy; it's unethical. That is the deeper moral of the marshmallow story.

A MARSHMALLOW PRESIDENT

One individual who has nothing whatever to do with this call to change, this ambition, and this desire for progress is Donald Trump—a president with the mental disposition of a four-year-old who sends tweets at 4 a.m. and immediately

feels slighted if everything doesn't go his way. The times when he posts his tweets and the grammatical mistakes they contain are an expression of an impulsiveness of a man whose own interests are all that matters, who considers political correctness a form of coercive self-censorship, and who would rather have a hamburger and a Coke ten times over a salad with mineral water.

Trump's populistic outbursts allow his supporters to feel at home in their emotional urges, preventing any sort of self-questioning just as effectively as any filter bubbles on the Internet. They are as intellectually simple as language itself in the multimedia age and operate as shortsightedly and irresponsibly as possible, for instance by promoting coal mining or denying climate change. Trump's refusal to do his homework as president and gain knowledge about policy areas he now controls, instead of spending hours watching television, is understandable to everyone who, in the face of all the sensations material on offer on his or her social networks, also has trouble reading words without pictures or listening to a guest speak for longer than a goldfish.

Thirty-five years after the fact it is clear that Walter Mischel's experiment with human personality did not end before November 2016. The question that remains to be answered is how the four-year-olds' ability to wait back then corresponds to the same people's electoral choices now. That is the deeper punchline in the *New Yorker* cartoon. The magazine's creators and readers know, of course, that Trump is so popular precisely because he's so unable to

control his inner urges. Trump supporters praise him for being "natural," "straightforward," and "authentic"—to name just some of the euphemistic adjectives for a person whose knowledge and behavior give no indication that he has ever been able to resist following a momentary impulse.

Trump is the perfect president for the Internet age because he frees his constituents of something of which he himself is incapable and which the Internet doesn't encourage anyway: the self-control to defer gratification. He was inaugurated as president on January 22, 2017, one day before the *New Yorker* cartoon, not despite but precisely because he would never even wait three seconds—to say nothing of fifteen minutes—for a marshmallow.

Vision, trans. Cioran Cronin (Cambridge: Polity, 2006). See also Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Cosmopolitan Patriots," *Critical Inquiry* 23 (Spring 1997): 617–639.

15. Mark Poster, "Digital Networks and Citizenship," *PMLA* 117, no. 1 (Jan. 2002): 98–103. Ethan Zuckerman stresses in his *Digital Cosmopolitans: Why We Think the Internet Connects Us, Why It Doesn't, and How to Rewire It* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013) that connection has not yet led people to deal with, let alone truly understand, one another.
16. See Zuckerberg's statement at the APEC CEO Summit in Peru on Nov. 19, 2016: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nV5yEPLn3_c, starting at 1:40.

CHAPTER 2

1. "Zaubertrick mit dem Smartphone im Strassenverkehr" [The mobile phone in traffic trick], May 5, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P9UxWcZbGMQ.
2. Marc Augé, *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity* (New York: Verso, 1995).
3. Marshall McLuhan, "The Medium Is the Message," in Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994); Heidegger, *The Question concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. and with an intro. by William Lovitt (New York: Garland, 1977), 19.
4. See Hans Joas, "Wertevermittlung in einer fragmentierten Gesellschaft," in *Die Zukunft der Bildung*, ed. Nelson Killius, Jürgen Kluge, and Linda Reisch (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2002), 58–77, at 71–72.
5. Compare the Randomized Living project of computer programmer Max Hawkins: "When the computer chose a location I would live there for roughly a month. Once there, the computer chose places to go, people to meet, and things to do within the selected city" (https://maxhawkins.me/work/randomized_living.html).

6. Judith Butler, *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, chapter 2: "Body in Alliance and the Politics of the Street" (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

CHAPTER 3

1. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/01/23/the-heroism-of-incremental-care.
2. Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979), xvi.
3. Vito Pilieci, "Canadians Now Have Shorter Attention Span Than Goldfish Thanks to Portable Devices: Microsoft Study," *National Post*, May 12, 2015, http://news.nationalpost.com/news/canada/canadians-now-have-shorter-attention-span-than-goldfish-thanks-to-portable-devices-microsoft-study.
4. Richard H. Thaler and Cass Sunstein, *Nudge*: *Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth, and Happiness* (New York: Penguin, 2009).
5. For this reading of Adorno, see Judith Butler, "Can One Lead a Good Life in a Bad Life?" in, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 193–220.
6. Theodor Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 19.

CHAPTER 4

1. Starting in 2016, the British insurer Chubb offered policies of up to 50,000 pounds to defray costs for psychological counseling, private detective searches for tormentors, and experts to remove content from the Internet. In February 2013, Switzerland's Groupe Mutuel began offering legal insurance policies that also covered cyberbullying. Marion Dakers, "'Troll Insurance' to Cover the Cost of Internet Bullying," *Telegraph*,