

A GRIEVANCE LOOKING FOR A CAUSE

Projection, cancel culture, the epistemology of hate, ontological arrogance, denial, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), duality, and the myth of neutrality in law — and the way out: Love is a verb, a skill and a ‘Will’. Love is not only a way of BEing, but also how you do BEing. You are worthy.

SUM ERGO DILIGO

“I AM, Therefore I Love”

“Je Suis, Donc J’aime”

Sorry René: Pourquoi nous avez-vous guillotinés?

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One hand in the Earth. The other in the Sky.

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Corrections and challenges

The final section of this book sets out, in advance, what would falsify each of its original claims. If you hold evidence that meets any of those conditions, I would genuinely like to receive it. I would rather be corrected than be quoted.

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How to Read This Book

This is one continuous argument, and it rewards being read from the beginning. But it is long, and not everyone arrives with the same question, so here is an honest map.

If you have twenty minutes and want the single most usable idea, read Section XI, *The Ladder of Non-Retaliatio*n. It contains the Retaliation Test, which works whether or not you accept anything else in this book. You can apply it to your own organisation this afternoon.

If you work in law, medicine, regulation or any inspected profession, start at Section VIII, *The Myth of Neutrality in Law*, and read through Section IX, *Ego Scaling*. That is the diagnosis of the machine you are standing inside.

If you came here because someone is doing this to you, read Sections III and IV — projection, and the epistemology of hate — and then Section XIV. The short version is that it was never about you, and you are not required to carry it.

If you are a sceptical academic reader, read *A Note on Method* and *On Novelty* first. They set out the evidence tiers, name the nearest neighbour for every original claim, and mark the places where the argument leaves the evidence behind and says so.

If you are here for the theology, Sections X and XIII carry it, and the Prologue explains why the textual seam in John 8 has been left visible rather than smoothed over.

A word on the method. This book is written with one hand in the Earth and the other in the Sky: empirical rigour and visionary reach, held together on purpose. Where a claim is established, it is stated as established. Where it is contested, it is flagged as contested. Where it is a metaphysical position I hold and cannot prove, I say so plainly. You will not be asked to accept anything without being told what kind of thing it is.

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Prologue: Between Two Stones

There is a stone waiting at both ends of John 8.

At the beginning, the stone has not yet been thrown. It is still inside a sentence. A woman has been brought into the Temple and placed, as the King James Version has it, "in the midst" — already translated out of personhood and into allegation. Her accusers do not ask who she is. They tell the court what she has done, cite an authorised legal grammar, and demand a ruling: *Moses in the law commanded us, that such should be stoned: but what sayest thou?*

Fifty verses later, the stones have entered human hands. *Then took they up stones to cast at him.*

Between those two stones — between a proposed judicial killing at one end and a threatened lynching at the other — the chapter passes through conscience, condemnation, light, judgement, testimony, identity, Truth, freedom, bondage, inheritance, love, hearing, falsehood, glory, and finally the two words around which everything that follows in this essay quietly organises itself: *I am*.

I want to be honest about this passage before I use it, because epistemic integrity is the price of admission to everything I am about to argue. The story of the woman taken in adultery — the *pericope adulterae*, John 7:53–8:11 — has one of the most complicated textual histories in the New Testament. Most textual scholars conclude it was not part of the earliest form of the Fourth Gospel. It is absent from major early Greek witnesses and wanders between locations in the later manuscript tradition. Jennifer Knust and Tommy Wasserman's landmark monograph ['To Cast the First Stone: The Transmission of a Gospel Story'](#) (2019) concludes it was probably incorporated into Greek copies of John after the Gospel was already circulating, while documenting how deeply it subsequently entered Latin Christianity, liturgy, manuscript culture and art.

So I will not claim that the Evangelist designed this chapter to begin and end with stones.

What I will claim is more precise, and I think more interesting. The *received* John 8 — the John 8 that Christianity has read, preached, painted and remembered for many centuries, the form preserved in the KJV — genuinely does possess that extraordinary architecture. It is not necessarily an authorial *inclusio*. It is a received canonical architecture. And reception is part of what texts become in human history.

The seam stays visible. The Earth Hand insists.

But the Sky Hand loses nothing, because the thing the chapter *does* between those two stones is the single most accurate description of the human condition I have ever encountered — and it is the reason this essay exists.

It reverses the gaze.

I. We Are All Guilty of Exactly One Thing

We are all one hundred percent guilty of being human.

We all have the human condition. That is why it is called the human condition. And the diagnosis of the human condition is the fracture of the psyche: a structural severance between the organismic, authentic ground of a person and the conditioned personality built to secure attachment, safety and belonging.

Like any condition, there is a way to heal it.

So: who are we to judge?

Why do some people become a grievance looking for a cause? Not *have* one — *become* one. Why does a human being arrive in a room already carrying a prosecution in search of a defendant? It is because they are living with an unrecognised, untreated, unhealed human condition. And the unbearable pressure of an interior they have never been permitted to meet has to go somewhere. So it goes outward, and it goes looking, and it finds you.

If you point a finger at someone for being human, you always have three fingers of the same hand pointing back at you. Try it now. It is not a metaphor; it is anatomy.

And the next time you are about to judge, ask yourself the only question that matters: *am I inhuman?*

Because the logic of retributive judgement, stated plainly, is insane. *You did something wrong. You hurt someone. Therefore I will hurt you.* Read that again slowly. The proposition beggars belief. We have simply been marinating in it for so long that it sounds like justice.

Compassion is the cure for the human condition. It is what Jesus demonstrated. Seeing the highest in the person society has designated as the lowest is the only thing that heals them — to witness them, to truly see and hear them, to reverse the inner panopticon in which they have been simultaneously prisoner and warden. You set them free. And in forgiving, you set yourself free.

Forgiveness, in the end, is simply the realisation that the past could not have been any different, and that it can hurt you no longer. Cast a spell: turn those you have felt hurt by into your angels, your greatest teachers. They gave you the clarity that there was inner work to do.

Where the fracture begins

This is not sentiment. It has an empirical floor, and the floor is well built.

Human development happens inside relational fields that demand adaptation long before conscious reflective agency exists. When care and validation are experienced as contingent on compliance, emotional suppression or performance, the developing organism encounters what psychologists call *parental conditional regard*.

Avi Assor and Guy Roth at Ben-Gurion University, with Edward Deci at Rochester, tested this within Self-Determination Theory in a two-study empirical investigation, ['The Emotional Costs of Parents' Conditional Regard: A Self-Determination Theory Analysis'](#) (2004), published in the Journal of Personality. Their conclusion is almost painfully

economical: conditional regard does succeed in producing the desired behaviours, but does so at significant affective costs. The compliance is real. So is the internal damage. What gets internalised is not autonomous endorsement but *introjected* self-regulation — behaviour driven by internal pressure rather than by a self that actually agrees. It brings resentment towards the socialising figures with it, and their first study, spanning three generations, found evidence compatible with the practice transmitting down the line.

Carl Rogers, in [‘A Theory of Therapy, Personality, and Interpersonal Relationships’](#) (1959), arrived at the same territory from humanistic psychology and called them *conditions of worth*: aspects of experience inconsistent with what earns approval must be denied or distorted, producing incongruence between what the organism actually experiences and the self it has been obliged to construct.

Donald Winnicott, in [‘Ego Distortion in Terms of True and False Self’](#) (1960/1965), named the outcome. The infant is subtly seduced into compliance and organises its defences around appeasing the environment rather than expressing spontaneous vitality. He called the resulting structure the ‘false self’ (the ego), and he noticed something the culture still refuses to notice: this adaptation frequently presents as *excellence*. High functioning. Exceptional achievement. Rigorous self-discipline. Reliability. The very qualities institutions recruit for.

Internally, it establishes an operational grammar of fear — the implicit conviction that unadorned being is unlovable, unsafe, or defective.

This is the birth of the inner panopticon. The critical, conditional voice of the early environment is installed as an autonomous psychic authority, and thereafter the individual functions as both prisoner and warden, perpetually assessing spontaneous impulse against an idealised standard. To survive under the gaze of that internal prosecutor, everything that threatens belonging — traits, somatic impulses, vulnerabilities, resentments, appetites, grief — is repressed into what Carl Jung, in [‘Two Essays on Analytical Psychology’](#) (1938/1966), called the shadow.

And here is the mechanism that generates everything that follows in this essay: **unacknowledged internal distress does not dissolve. It converts into ambient, outward-facing tension.**

The person becomes a grievance looking for a cause. A state of chronic psychological readiness in which unintegrated self-hatred and fear scan the interpersonal environment for a target on which the internal disquiet can be legitimately discharged.

Legitimately. That word is doing enormous work. The shadow does not want to attack. The shadow wants **permission** to attack.

And a culture that supplies permission — a courtroom, a comment section, a regulator, a disciplinary panel, a quote-tweet — is not a neutral container. It is a delivery mechanism.

II. The Body Keeps the Ledger

The defences forged in early life are not confined to cognitive schemas. They are inscribed into physiology.

The Adverse Childhood Experiences study — the large observational cohort study by Vincent Felitti, Robert Anda and colleagues, [‘Relationship of Childhood Abuse and Household Dysfunction to Many of the Leading Causes of Death in Adults: The Adverse Childhood Experiences \(ACE\) Study’](#) (1998), published in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine with a cohort of more than 9,500 adults — established a graded, dose-response relationship between the number of categories of childhood adversity and adult biomedical and psychosocial disease. It is one of the most consequential findings in the history of public health, and it has been replicated with almost tedious reliability ever since.

Karen Hughes, Mark Bellis and colleagues published the definitive systematic review and meta-analysis, [‘The Effect of Multiple Adverse Childhood Experiences on Health: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis’](#) (2017), in The Lancet Public Health: thirty-seven studies, twenty-three outcomes, 253,719 participants. People with four or more ACEs showed elevated risk across every single health outcome examined, with associations weakest for physical inactivity and obesity and strongest for problematic substance use, interpersonal and self-directed violence, and mental ill-health.

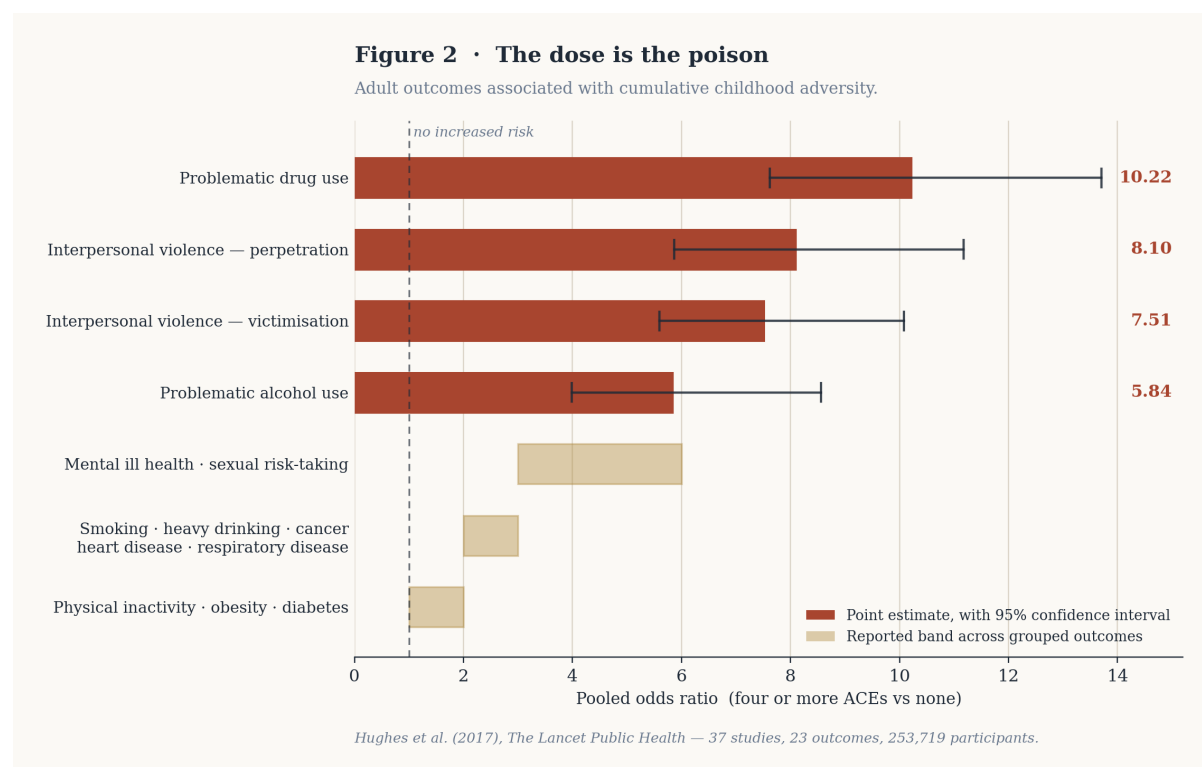


Figure 2. Pooled odds ratios for adult outcomes, four or more ACEs versus none. Data: [Hughes et al. \(2017\)](#). The Lancet Public Health.

The scale of exposure is not marginal. Sheri Madigan and colleagues, in the prevalence meta-analysis [‘Adverse Childhood Experiences: A Meta-Analysis of Prevalence and Moderators Among Half a Million Adults in 206 Studies’](#) (2023), published in World Psychiatry, pooled 206 studies across 22 countries and 546,458 adults. Around six in ten adults report at least one adverse childhood experience. Roughly one in six report four or

more. Their team followed this with the systematic review and meta-analysis [‘Prevalence of Adverse Childhood Experiences in Child Population Samples: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis’](#) (2025), published in JAMA Pediatrics, and further prevalence meta-analyses have continued to appear in *The Lancet Public Health* through 2026.

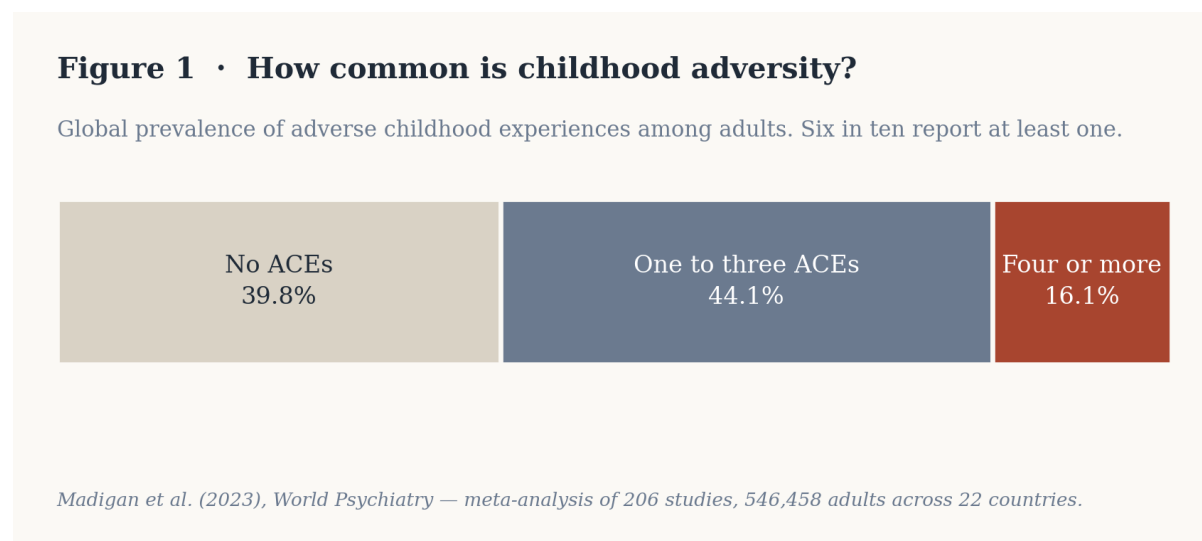


Figure 1. Global prevalence of adverse childhood experiences. Data: [Madigan et al. \(2023\)](#), World Psychiatry.

Six in ten. That is not a clinical subpopulation. That is the electorate. That is a majority. That is the jury pool. That is the bar, the bench, the regulator, the newsroom, the comment section, and the person reading this sentence.

Martin Teicher and Jacqueline Samson, in their research review [‘Annual Research Review: Enduring Neurobiological Effects of Childhood Abuse and Neglect’](#) (2016), published in the Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, showed that childhood maltreatment and chronic emotional neglect alter developmental trajectories in circuits governing threat detection, emotional regulation and stress responsiveness. Bessel van der Kolk's synthesis in [‘The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma’](#) (2014) names the substrate exactly: the body keeps the score. Hypervigilance, autonomic reactivity, emotional numbing — intelligent adaptations to an unpredictable or conditional home — persist into adulthood as chronic physiological traits that are actively harvested. Is this ‘Trauma Scouting’?

Alice Miller, in [‘The Drama of the Gifted Child: The Search for the True Self’](#) (1979/1981), saw the consequence for autobiography. Conscious memory routinely edits what the somatic self retains. The Truth of childhood Trauma remains stored in the body, invulnerable to superficial rationalisation. Which means that when an adult meets relational ambiguity, institutional stress or personal vulnerability, the nervous system can bypass higher-order deliberation and reactivate defences formed decades earlier.

What then presents, in professional and interpersonal life, as principled strictness, visceral distaste or moral outrage, is frequently an unintegrated nervous system defending itself against the reactivation of its earliest wounds.

The Earth-Hand fence

Now let me build the fence, because this argument has been abused before and I will not hand anyone the weapon.

ACE scores are population risk instruments. They are not individual prophecies. A high score does not predict what any particular person will do, and a low score confers no immunity. Adversity is graded and probabilistic, not deterministic. Enormous numbers of people with four or more ACEs become extraordinarily compassionate, and some of the cruellest people you will ever meet had unremarkable childhoods.

Conditional love is also *not* an ACE. The ACE instruments measure abuse, neglect and household dysfunction; conditional regard is a distinct construct and the two should not be collapsed into one variable. I am arguing that they rhyme, not that they are identical. Conditional love, expectation, emotional dysfunction, and the failure to witness a wound are all childhood Trauma.

And the historical warning matters. The argument that psychological damage is predictable in advance has an ugly pedigree. In the Second World War, American psychiatric screening excluded roughly twelve per cent of fifteen million men on "predisposition" grounds — around six times the First World War rate — and the war-neurosis rate roughly doubled anyway. The programme was abolished in 1944. Follow-up of psychiatrically rejected men who served regardless found the overwhelming majority served satisfactorily. In the RAF, a predisposition bar would have excluded aircrew who later broke down — including men decorated for gallantry.

The fork, therefore, is absolute: **population risk, never individual prediction.**

That fence is exactly what permits the Sky Hand to go as far as it does. Because what I am actually claiming is not that damaged people become monsters. I am claiming something less lurid and far more uncomfortable:

Almost everyone in every room is carrying something the room has agreed not to mention. And the systems we have built for judging one another were designed by people carrying exactly the same thing, and are staffed by people who have been rewarded for never saying so.

That is not an accusation. It is a description of the water.

III. Projection: The Blame Game Nobody Wins

Jung, in ['Two Essays on Analytical Psychology'](#) (1938/1966), called projection one of the commonest psychic phenomena, and put the mechanism in a sentence that ought to be engraved above the door of every court, every regulator, every editorial office and every school:

everything that is unconscious in ourselves we discover in our neighbour — and we treat him accordingly.

He then made the observation that turns the sentence from psychology into indictment. We no longer subject the neighbour to trial by ordeal. We do not burn him. We injure him instead by means of moral verdicts pronounced with the deepest conviction.

With the deepest conviction. Note that. Sincerity is not evidence of accuracy. Sincerity is frequently the *symptom*.

Freud, in ['Instincts and Their Vicissitudes'](#) (1915), understood projection as a defence against the anxiety provoked by facing one's own faults, desires, transgressions and destructive tendencies. Jung added the crucial developmental twist: projection is not merely a pathology to be eliminated. It is one of the primary means by which unconscious material becomes visible at all. The healthy move, having projected, is to recognise the subjective origin of the projection, withdraw it from the external world, and integrate what has been disowned.

The unhealthy move is to believe the film on the screen is happening in the room.

The intrapsychic loop runs like this. Unresolved guilt, shame and fear of defectiveness generate unbearable tension in the shadow. To protect conscious self-esteem, the ego externalises that tension, scanning for an external target whose behaviour or traits will serve as a hook. Once the target is located, a severe moral verdict is pronounced. And the pronouncement achieves what it was always for: a temporary psychic equilibrium. By condemning the other, the individual confirms their own imagined righteousness.

Temporary. That is why it must be repeated. That is why the person who scapegoated you will need another scapegoat within the month, and another after that, and why their life becomes a repeating pattern of exits and enemies. After driving one scapegoat away, they usually discover that the problem persists. They are miserable. That discovery is the door. Most people do not walk through it. They look for another scapegoat. And their misery deepens.



Plate II · A grievance looking for a cause. The projector sits where the heart should be, and its beam falls on every door but his own. Behind him on the floor lie the brass nameplates of everyone who has already served as the explanation. The shadow thrown on the wall is the right size for the person who is actually walking down the corridor.

The nameplates on the floor in the above image are the part that should trouble us, because each one was a person who was, at the time, entirely convincing as the problem. Each was investigated. Each was discussed. In several cases there were meetings. And each was replaced within the month by the next one, which ought to have been the clue and never is. The man in the corridor is not lying to anybody. He is doing something far more durable than lying: he is sincerely reporting what he sees, and what he sees is coming out of his own chest.

Hermann Hesse put the diagnostic test in a single line: if you hate a person, you hate something in him that is part of yourself — because what is not part of ourselves does not disturb us. The clinical psychologist Dana Harron says the same thing in modern language: the things people hate about others are the things they fear within themselves; the target functions as a screen. The therapist Brad Reedy adds the developmental origin: our need to be good causes us to project badness outward and attack it, because badness in ourselves once put us at risk of rejection and abandonment.

The great contemporary contemplative Michael Singer, in [**‘Living Untethered: Beyond the Human Predicament’**](#) (2022), supplies the mechanics of release: the moment in front of you is not bothering you. You are bothering yourself about the moment in front of you. It is not personal — you are making it personal.

Read that again, and don't ever forget it. That is the malign legacy of childhood Trauma operating in adult life, in one sentence, without a single diagnostic code.

And Gabor Maté closes the loop with the honesty of a clinician who has watched it in himself: when he is sharply judgemental of another person, it is because he senses in them some aspect of himself he does not want to acknowledge.

Jung also saw where this goes when it stops being personal. In [‘The Undiscovered Self’](#) (1957) he warned that modern societies, having identified themselves with abstractions of rationalism and moral purity, are perpetually at risk of losing conscious relationship with their shadow. When a collective disowns its shadow, it projects it across political, ideological or social frontiers. The collective enjoys the illusion of its own absolute righteousness while attributing all destructive and malicious impulses to the designated adversary.

Having an enemy on whom the collective can foist all evil provides profound conscious relief. It insulates the group from the demanding work of self-examination.

Which is exactly why the enemy is never allowed to become a person.

60,000 witches (85 percent were women) were executed over 300 years. And then they realised that there are no witches. The vast majority were killed as scapegoats. Many were killed after blaming them for the weather...

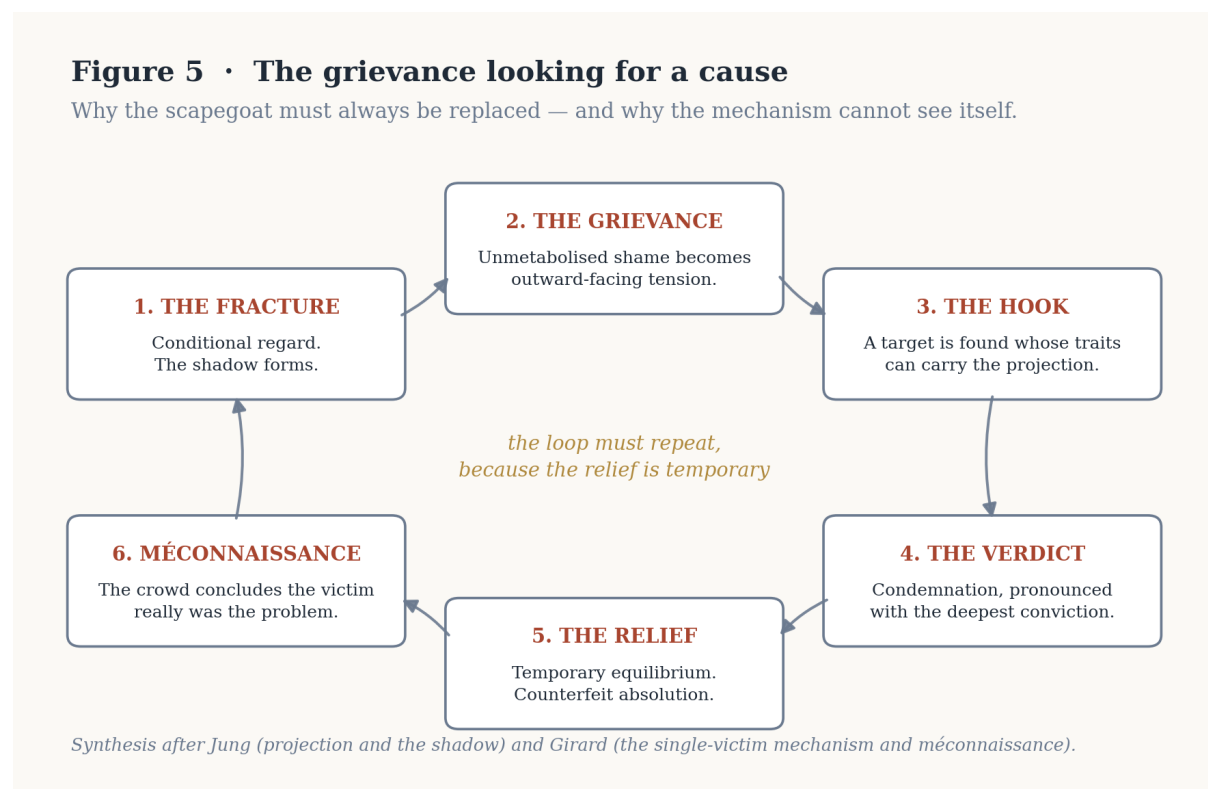


Figure 5. The projection–scapegoat loop, after [Jung](#) and [Girard](#).

IV. The Epistemology of Hate: Egocentric Fear Dressed as Combative Armour

Now we come to the heart of it.

I want to argue something more specific than "hate is bad." I want to argue that hate is an **epistemology** — a way of knowing, with its own rules of evidence, its own standards of proof, its own peer review, and its own catastrophic and entirely predictable failure mode.

And I want to name what it actually is beneath the costume: **egocentric fear, dressed as combative armour.**

Hate is not a primary emotion

Anger, fear and disgust are primary. They are evolutionarily fundamental, universal across cultures, present in infancy, with distinct physiological and expressive signatures. Anger, properly expressed, is not a problem at all — it is information, and it is healthy when it is assertive rather than aggressive. Suppressing it is frequently itself a consequence of childhood conditioning.

Hate is different. Hate is secondary and learned — assembled out of personal experience, social conditioning and cognitive process. It is a strong negative *attachment*, and its peculiar signature is that it is not really focused on its stated target at all.

George Washington Carver put the whole aetiology in twelve words: fear of something is at the root of hate for others.

The psychologist Bernard Golden, in the clinical synthesis ['Overcoming Destructive Anger: Strategies That Work'](#) (2016), describes acts of hate as attempts to distract oneself from helplessness, powerlessness, injustice, inadequacy and shame. Hate is grounded in perceived threat. Like much anger, it is a reaction to, and a distraction from, some form of inner pain. The person consumed by hate may believe the only way to regain power over their own suffering is to strike pre-emptively at others. Each moment of hate is a temporary reprieve from their own interior.

Temporary again. Always temporary. That is why the supply must be continuous.

Golden also notes that when hate is practised *in a group*, it can foster a sense of connection and camaraderie that fills a void in identity. This is the recruitment mechanism, and it is worth stating baldly: hating together is the cheapest available form of belonging. You do not have to be anything, build anything, or risk anything. You only have to be against.

James Baldwin saw why people cling so stubbornly to their hatreds: they sense that once the hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with the pain.

That is the whole architecture. Hate is a load-bearing wall in a house built over an unexcavated grief.

The armour

Here is why I call it combative armour rather than simply fear.

Armour has three properties. It protects. It restricts. And it is heavy.

The person who has organised themselves around hostility has achieved genuine protection — from vulnerability, from the terror of dependence, from the memory of what it cost them to need someone who did not come. Nothing gets in. But nothing gets in *including nourishment*, which is why the hater is chronically starving and cannot say what for.

Winnicott, in ['Ego Distortion in Terms of True and False Self'](#) (1960/1965), observed that abused and traumatised children often do not dare to hope for love. They anticipate rejection; they predict disappointment with absolute certainty. And so, to defend against hurt and loss, some of them hate ostentatiously, visibly, as performance. They provoke the hatred they expect, because a confirmed prophecy is less terrifying than an open question. It is a lifelong test, and it is designed to fail.

To be hated is, for such a person, to be *real*. To be hated is to be right, to be noticed, to be validated in the belief that the world is a hostile jungle. Persecution becomes proof of uniqueness. The martyrdom is self-administered.

Charles Horton Cooley, in ['Human Nature and the Social Order'](#) (1902), called it the looking-glass self: we see ourselves through what we imagine others see. Hegel had already said that consciousness of Self depends on the presence of the other. Sartre observed that the perception of the world changes when another person appears. We shape-shift as people enter our presence. Which means the child shaped by adults who reacted to its distress with contempt does not merely remember contempt. It becomes an organ for producing it.

Hurt people hurt people. Healed people heal people. Transformed people transform people.



Plate III · Hate is fear wearing armour. The plate has no hinges. Bread and fruit are held out from every side, the rain falls as light, and none of it can get in. The eyes in the visor slit are the only part of him that was not forged.

Everything he could possibly need is being held out to him at arm's length, by people who are still, after all this time, willing to hold it out. The bread is real. The offer is real. And the armour has no hinges. That is what makes this the saddest image in the book rather than the most frightening one — we are not looking at a monster who refuses nourishment, but at someone who long ago made himself unreachable in order to survive, and who has since forgotten that the decision was ever his. The eyes in the visor slit are the only part of him that was not forged.

Why it counts as an epistemology

Hate is not just a feeling. It is a *knowledge system*, and it operates with terrifying internal consistency.

It has a doctrine of evidence: anything confirming the target's badness is admissible; anything disconfirming it is a manipulation. Gregory S. Parks, a law professor and psychologist at Wake Forest, notes the machinery: motivated reasoning, in which the conclusion is fixed and the reasoning is retro-fitted; and confirmation bias, in which even trivial negative information is eagerly absorbed. The hater is not a dispassionate observer who happens to have reached a harsh conclusion. The hater is emotionally motivated to hate, and the reasoning arrives afterwards, wearing the uniform of analysis.

It has a doctrine of jurisdiction: the hater may examine you exhaustively, and may not be examined at all.

It has a peer review process: the recruitment of allies. Parks describes them memorably as flying monkeys, the enablers who do the dirty work. Desperate recruitment is not incidental to hatred; it is structural, because a private hatred is merely a feeling, and a hatred with a chorus is a *verdict*.

And it has a foundational axiom that can never be tested, because testing it would collapse the entire structure: **the badness is in you, not in me.**

That axiom is why hate is epistemically catastrophic. Every knowledge system needs at least one procedure capable of returning the answer *I was wrong*. Hate has removed that procedure deliberately, because the procedure is precisely what it was built to avoid.

Which is why you cannot argue anyone out of it. You are not disputing a conclusion. You are asking a person to dismantle the wall holding up their house, using only the tools they built to keep the wall standing.



Plate IV · Fear organised as knowledge. The shield reads I AM NOT AFRAID, which is a sentence no unafraid person has ever needed engraved on anything. Note the apparatus required to hold the position: a library of legitimating texts, a wall of authorised expressions, standing orders written out where they can be consulted. The mirror is cracked, and the mirror is accurate.

The shield is the tell. *I am not afraid* is a sentence no unafraid person has ever needed to have engraved on anything. And notice how much apparatus is required to hold the position: the library of legitimating texts, the wall of authorised expressions, the standing orders written out where they can be consulted. This is not a mood. It is an epistemology, with a doctrine of evidence, a set of admissible sources and a procedure for handling dissent. The mirror is cracked and the mirror is accurate, and he is the only person in the room who cannot look at it.

Dehumanisation: the operating requirement

Hate requires one final component, and social psychology has measured it with unusual precision.

Nour Kteily, Emile Bruneau, Adam Waytz and Sarah Cotterill, in the empirical research programme ['The Ascent of Man: Theoretical and Empirical Evidence for Blatant Dehumanization'](#) (2015), published in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, developed the "Ascent of Man" measure of blatant dehumanisation: respondents place groups on the familiar evolutionary-progress diagram, from ape-like ancestor to modern human. The results were, and remain, shocking. Ordinary people in ordinary Western samples openly rate outgroups as *less evolved*, and those ratings robustly predict support for torture, hostility toward refugees and immigrants, reluctance to provide humanitarian aid, and appetite for

armed conflict. Kteily, Gordon Hodson and Bruneau later demonstrated meta-dehumanisation across ten studies in [**‘They See Us as Less Than Human: Metadehumanization Predicts Intergroup Conflict via Reciprocal Dehumanization’**](#) (2016): perceiving that they dehumanise us drives us to dehumanise them, in a reciprocal spiral.

Dehumanisation strips a person of the qualities that make them relatable. It is what makes cruelty feel like hygiene.

And here is the point I most want to land: **we all risk doing this**. Every one of us can react by making someone wrong because we feel afraid. Dehumanisation is not the specialist equipment of extremists. It is the standard-issue defensive reflex of a frightened primate with a vocabulary.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn wrote the sentence that ends every fantasy of moral segregation: the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.

Not between the good people and the bad people.

Through your heart. And mine.

And this is the good news

Because hate is learned, it can be unlearned. Because it is secondary, it is not the substrate. Because it is armour, it can be taken off — and the reason people do not take it off is not stubbornness but terror, which means the correct response is not contempt but safety.

Martin Luther King Jr. said darkness cannot drive out darkness — only light can do that. He also said, with clinical accuracy, that men hate each other because they fear each other, and fear each other because they do not know each other.

Not knowing is the mechanism. So knowing is the cure.

Hate destroys the hater. That is not a moral wish; it is physiology. Sustained hostility keeps the threat system chronically engaged, and a nervous system that never leaves defence never enters repair. Resentment is Soul suicide. And the ancient formulation remains the most exact: resentment is drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die.

Katherine Anne Porter set the asymmetry down perfectly. Love must be learned, and learned again and again; hate needs no instruction, but only waits to be provoked.

Which means love is a *skill* and a *will* — and that is precisely what makes choosing it an act of freedom rather than an act of compliance.

V. Ontological Arrogance: When the Spotlight Mistakes Itself for the Sun

There is a specific cognitive posture that converts private projection into institutional violence, and it deserves its own name.

Fred Kofman, in ['Conscious Business: How to Build Value Through Values'](#) (2006), calls it ontological arrogance: the claim that your truth is the only truth. Not the belief that you are right — everyone believes they are right, that is what believing means. Ontological arrogance is the collapse of the distinction between *my interpretation of reality* and *reality*. The arrogant party does not experience themselves as holding a view. They experience themselves as reporting the world.

Its opposite, ontological humility, is the acknowledgement that you hold no special claim on reality, and that others may hold perspectives equally deserving of consideration. Kofman is candid that this is intellectually obvious and emotionally almost impossible, especially mid-conflict — which is exactly when it is needed.

Watch what happens when the two postures meet disagreement. To the ontologically humble, disagreement is data. To the ontologically arrogant, disagreement is *attack* — an existential threat more urgent than the problem under discussion, because self-worth has been staked on being right.

That is the hinge. Once being right is load-bearing for identity, correction becomes annihilation, and the person who offers correction becomes an enemy.

The disciplinary version

Scale it up and you get the pathology of professions.

Thomas Kuhn, in ['The Structure of Scientific Revolutions'](#) (1962), showed that a paradigm defines what counts as a legitimate problem and a legitimate method — which is not a flaw but the very thing that makes cumulative specialist inquiry possible. Andrew Abbott, in ['The System of Professions: An Essay on the Division of Expert Labor'](#) (1988), added the political dimension: professions do not merely know things, they claim *jurisdiction* over problems and forms of expert work, and they exist in an interdependent, competitive system. Niklas Luhmann, in ['Social Systems'](#) (1995), supplied the coldest formulation: social systems process incoming information through their own system-specific code, and cannot process what their code cannot represent.

None of that is pathological in itself. The pathology begins when methodological humility is lost and the partial framework claims ontological totality.

Here is the image I keep returning to. A discipline — law, medicine, psychiatry, academia, journalism, regulation — operates like a spotlight. It is an instrument, owned and held and aimed by an observer who stands safely behind the beam. It illuminates one sector brilliantly and casts everything else into deeper shadow. And the observer, crucially, is *invisible*: to be behind the beam is to be exempt from it.

The catastrophe occurs when the discipline mistakes its narrow beam for the whole sky.

Notice what such a system cannot see. It cannot see the harm it produces, because the harm is not indexed in its code. Lack of unconditional love does not compute in *legal* or *illegal*. It does not compute in *sick* or *healthy*. It does not compute in *pass* or *fail*. So the harm becomes

literally unspeakable — not concealed, not denied, but *unrepresentable* — and the person carrying it is then held responsible for their inability to articulate a complaint.

Jesus does not, in John 8, claim to hold a better spotlight. He identifies himself with a different order of illumination altogether: *I am the light of the world* — the light of the *cosmos*, unowned, unpossessable, un-aimable.

The Sun shining upon the spotlights.

Every institutional authority is reminded, by that image, that its specialised aperture does not confer ownership of reality. And every one of us who has ever pronounced with the deepest conviction is standing in the same universal light as the person we pronounced upon.

There is nowhere behind the beam to stand.

VI. Denial: The Third Pillar

Projection explains why we need a target. Ontological arrogance explains why we cannot be corrected. **Denial explains why none of this is visible from inside.**

The sociologist Stanley Cohen, in ['States of Denial: Knowing About Atrocities and Suffering'](#) (2001), gave us the taxonomy that everything else hangs on. **Literal denial** is the flat rejection of the facts: it did not happen. **Interpretive denial** accepts the facts but re-describes them: it happened, but it was not *that* — not abuse, not torture, not bullying, not harm; it was robust management, enhanced interrogation, professional standards, healthy debate. **Implicatory denial** accepts both fact and description, and denies the *consequence*: yes, it happened, yes it was that, but nothing follows from it that requires me to act.

Anyone who has watched an institution respond to an allegation has watched all three deployed in sequence within a single afternoon.

Cohen's deeper contribution is the phenomenology of *knowing and not-knowing*: the state in which we simultaneously possess information and decline to register it. Blocking out. Turning a blind eye. Wearing blinkers. Seeing what we want to see. He shows how it works in individuals, in bystanders, in bureaucracies and in whole societies, and he is careful about the uncomfortable possibility that some illusions are load-bearing.

Betrayal blindness

Jennifer Freyd's betrayal-trauma research programme, articulated in the theoretical paper ['Violations of Power, Adaptive Blindness, and Betrayal Trauma Theory'](#) (1997), has spent three decades measuring the same phenomenon in the specific case where the harm comes from someone you depend on. Her betrayal trauma theory names the terrible bind: when the person or institution harming you is also the person or institution you need, awareness itself becomes dangerous. So awareness is sacrificed. She calls the resulting state **betrayal blindness** — the unawareness, not-knowing and forgetting people exhibit towards betrayals, precisely in order to preserve the relationships and institutions on which they depend.

That is not stupidity. That is attachment doing exactly what attachment evolved to do.

Freyd also named the manoeuvre that institutions and individuals reach for when the not-knowing fails. **DARVO**: Deny, Attack, and Reverse Victim and Offender. Deny the behaviour. Attack the credibility of whoever names it. Then reverse the roles, so that the accused becomes the wronged party and the person who spoke becomes the aggressor.

Institutional DARVO — the same manoeuvre performed by an organisation — she identifies as a particularly aggressive form of institutional betrayal.

Hold that structure in your mind, because you have seen it a hundred times. You will see it again in the cancel-culture section. You will see it again in the section on law. It is one of the most scale-invariant patterns in human affairs, and it is *coded and countable*, which makes it evidence rather than opinion.

Méconnaissance: the invisibility is functional

René Girard, in [‘The Scapegoat’](#) (1982/1986), supplies the final and most disturbing layer.

In Girard's account, human communities resolve internal crisis by converging — spontaneously, unanimously, contagiously — on a single victim. The expulsion works. Peace genuinely returns. And the community, contemplating its restored calm, does not conclude that it has just done something arbitrary and terrible. It concludes that the victim really *was* the problem.

Girard calls that retrospective misreading **méconnaissance** — misrecognition — and the crucial point is that it is not a side-effect of the mechanism. It is the mechanism's *operating requirement*. The single-victim process functions only through the ignorance of the people running it. Understood, it stops working.

Which means the invisibility you keep encountering when you try to name this is not a failure of institutional perception.

It is a functional necessity of institutional cohesion. They cannot see it, because seeing it would stop it, and stopping it would return the crisis it was resolving.

The third explanation — and its ancestry

I want to name what this adds up to, and I want to name it carefully, because the temptation to over-claim here is considerable.

Most writing about institutional harm assumes one of two things: **malice** (someone wanted this) or **incompetence** (someone got it wrong). There is a third possibility, and it is the one this essay is built on: that the harm is produced structurally, requires no defendant, and is invisible from inside because invisibility is what allows it to keep working.

That third category is not my discovery, and it would be dishonest to present it as one. It is the shared insight of a substantial body of scholarship, and any reader who knows the field will supply the names before I do. Diane Vaughan's [‘The Challenger Launch Decision: Risky Technology, Culture, and Deviance at NASA’](#) (1996) is the canonical instance: she finds

no villain in the decision to launch, and shows instead how mistake, mishap and disaster are socially organised and systematically produced by structure. Hannah Arendt's banality of evil, Zygmunt Bauman's ['Modernity and the Holocaust'](#) (1989), Albert Bandura's ['Moral Disengagement in the Perpetration of Inhumanities'](#) (1999), Johan Galtung's ['Violence, Peace, and Peace Research'](#) (1969), Michael Lipsky's ['Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services'](#) (1980), Chris Argyris's ['Overcoming Organizational Defenses: Facilitating Organizational Learning'](#) (1990), Sandra Bloom's ['Creating Sanctuary: Toward the Evolution of Sane Societies \(2nd Ed.\)'](#) (2013), Karl Weick's ['Sensemaking in Organizations'](#) (1995), and Cohen's implicatory denial are all, in their different registers, accounts of harm without a culprit.

Pierre Bourdieu, in ['Language and Symbolic Power'](#) (1991), belongs on that list too, and here a caution is required, because he uses the same French word Girard does. **Bourdieu's méconnaissance* is the misrecognition of arbitrary power as legitimate — symbolic violence works because the dominated accept the categories of the dominant as natural.* Girard's *méconnaissance*** is the constitutive non-knowledge on which the scapegoat mechanism depends — the crowd must not know what it is doing, or the expulsion will not deliver peace. They are cousins, not twins, and running them together would be a real error.

So what, if anything, is mine here?

Not the category. The **mechanism**, stated at a particular level of specificity: that invisibility is not a by-product of institutional harm but a *functional requirement* of institutional cohesion, in the strict Girardian sense that the process is disabled by being understood. And the consequent operating conditions, which are minimal and therefore very hard to legislate against: a system need only reward what fear produces, decline to ask where the fear came from, and punish whoever asks. Nobody has to know anything. That is why there is no defendant, and why the usual remedies — find the bad actor, improve the training — cannot reach it.

That formulation, joined to the anxiety cascade described later in this essay, is what I would defend as new. The territory itself is well-populated, and I am glad of the company.

The knowledge that never gets made

There is one more form of not-knowing, and it is the most rigorous, because it requires nobody to have suppressed anything.

Scott Frickel, David Hess and colleagues, in the research-agenda analysis ['Undone Science: Charting Social Movement and Civil Society Challenges to Research Agenda Setting'](#) (2010), published in *Science, Technology & Human Values*, named it undone science: areas of research left unfunded, incomplete or ignored, which civil-society actors identify as important. Their central move is to show that the systematic nonproduction of knowledge emerges from a matrix of state, industry and movement interests without anyone having to conspire. It sits inside the broader field mapped by Robert Proctor and Londa

Schiebinger in ['Agnotology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance'](#) (2008) — agnotology, the study of how ignorance is manufactured and maintained.

This matters enormously for the argument I am making, because the honest version of my thesis has no defendant.

The conspiratorial version — that elite institutions knowingly recruit the childhood-wounded because damage makes people productive — cannot be supported, and it has a single point of failure that any regulator can hit in one sentence: *we have never assessed a candidate's childhood*. Which is true. And the whole architecture appears to collapse.

The structural version has no such vulnerability, because it requires nobody to have known anything. It requires only three things, each of which is documented: that a system rewards what fear produces; that it declines to ask where the fear came from; and that it punishes whoever asks.

A harm with no defendant is far harder to stop than a harm with a culprit.

And the missing evidence, in this territory, is mostly jurisdictional rather than cowardly. The causal chain from conditional love through defended adulthood into professional culture and institutional design crosses six disciplines and belongs to none of them. Developmental psychology has one link. Trauma research has another. Organisational sociology has a third. Systems theory has a fourth. Nobody owns the chain, so nobody funds the study, so the study does not exist, so the absence of the study is cited as evidence of absence.

Miranda Fricker, in ['Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing'](#) (2007), named the wrong done to a person specifically as a knower. **Testimonial injustice** is being disbelieved because of who you are. **Hermeneutical injustice** is subtler and prior: being harmed by a gap in collective interpretive resources — having no available concept with which to understand your own experience. Her paradigm case is sexual harassment before the culture possessed the word, when a woman leaving a job because of something unnameable had to write on the form that her reasons were *personal*.

Now scale it and add operational closure, and you get something Fricker does not describe, which I will call **hermeneutical enclosure**.

The professions are the culture's concept factories. Medicine issues the concepts for suffering; law for wrong; education for capacity; regulation for misconduct. So a person harmed by an architecture of conditional worth must go to those factories for the word. But the factories are themselves organised around that architecture, and each processes reality through a code that cannot represent it.

The gap is not accidental. It is maintained by the institutions best placed to close it, and it is maintained precisely because closing it would dissolve them.

Before I go further with that term I should place it properly, because the epistemologies-of-ignorance literature has been working this ground for two decades and a reader who knows it deserves to see that I do too.

Fricker herself, in ['Epistemic Injustice and the Preservation of Ignorance'](#) (2016), ties hermeneutical injustice directly to the *active preservation* of not-knowing, and locates the concept-generating sites in exactly the institutions I have named: legal, medical, political, religious, educational. Gaile Pohlhaus Jr., in ['Relational Knowing and Epistemic Injustice: Toward a Theory of Willful Hermeneutical Ignorance'](#) (2012), gave us wilful hermeneutical ignorance — the refusal of dominantly situated knowers to take up interpretive tools developed by those situated marginally, a refusal that can itself become institutionalised in policy. Kristie Dotson, in ['A Cautionary Tale: On Limiting Epistemic Oppression'](#) (2012), added contributory injustice, a third order of exclusion in which the concepts *have* been produced by the marginalised and the dominant simply decline to circulate them, and then went further in ['Conceptualizing Epistemic Oppression'](#) (2014), describing an irreducible epistemic oppression whose inadequacy sits in the structure of the shared epistemic system rather than in the conduct of any participant. Elizabeth Anderson had already relocated the whole question to the level of institutional design in ['Epistemic Justice as a Virtue of Social Institutions'](#) (2012). José Medina, in ['The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations'](#) (2013), named active ignorance and the meta-blindness of those who cannot see their own not-seeing; Charles Mills, in ['White Ignorance'](#) (2007), described white ignorance as structurally maintained miscognition; Nancy Tuana mapped the varieties in ['The Speculum of Ignorance: The Women's Health Movement and Epistemologies of Ignorance'](#) (2006). Amandine Catala's account in ['Democracy, Trust, and Epistemic Justice'](#) (2015) comes closest of all to the point I am making about institutional codes: the dominant group's interpretive resources are actively imposed, so that the subordinated cannot achieve intelligibility in the only vocabulary that officially counts. Havi Carel and Ian James Kidd have shown the same structures operating in healthcare in ['Epistemic Injustice in Healthcare: A Philosophical Analysis'](#) (2014).

Set alongside agnotology and undone science, the position is clear: that interpretive gaps are produced and maintained by the powerful is now established scholarship, not a fresh discovery.

What I am adding is narrower, and I want to state it precisely so it can be tested.

First, a taxonomy: each profession functions as a concept factory for one domain, and each factory issues concepts in a code — medicine in *sick* and *healthy*, law in *legal* and *illegal*, education in *pass* and *fail*, regulation in *compliant* and *in breach*. I have not found that parallel mapping set out anywhere as a single structure.

Second — and this is the part I would actually defend — the **reflexive lock**. Not merely that institutions maintain the gap, but that the institution which maintains it is the same institution to which you are required to report the harm. The gap-maker and the mandated recipient of the complaint are one body. That is what turns a hermeneutical injustice into an enclosure: not a field left uncultivated, but a common fenced by the party you would have to petition for access.

The metaphor is borrowed on purpose. The enclosure of the commons was not a failure of agriculture. It was a transfer of ownership, conducted lawfully, by the people who wrote the law.

This is, I think, the sharpest instrument in the whole diagnosis, because it explains the peculiar loneliness that runs through every testimony of this kind — the sense of carrying something enormous and finding there is no counter to take it to.

There is no counter.

The counter was built by the thing you want to report.



Plate V · Hermeneutical enclosure. The counter looks like marble until you look. It is built from statute, diagnosis, regulation and examination — the codes that decide in advance what may be said. His page is not blank because he has nothing to report. It is blank because there is no word for it. Through the window, in daylight, a common is being fenced by men with instruments. They are not thieves. They have paperwork.

He has come to the right building. That is the cruelty of it. He has followed the process, arrived at the counter, and presented his account to the person appointed to receive it — and the clerk is not malicious, and the stamps are not wrong. They are simply the only stamps there are. His page glows because there is something on it, and it reads as blank because the vocabulary that would render it legible was never manufactured by any of the factories whose products this hall is built from. Through the window, in daylight, men with instruments are fencing a field that used to belong to everyone. They are not thieves. They have paperwork.

VII. Cancel Culture: The Scapegoat Mechanism With a Broadband Connection

Everything above converges here.

Take a population in which six in ten adults carry adverse childhood experience. Add a defensive architecture in which unmetabolised shame converts into outward-facing tension. Add ontological arrogance, so that disagreement registers as attack. Add denial, so the mechanism is invisible from inside. Then hand the whole assembly a device that supplies infinite targets, instant coalitions, permanent records, and a reward signal calibrated to fire hardest on moral condemnation.

You will not get justice. You will get a machine for the industrial-scale manufacture of counterfeit absolution.

The status engine

The philosophers Justin Tosi and Brandon Warmke, in [‘Moral Grandstanding’](#) (2016), gave the core behaviour its name: **moral grandstanding** — the use of public moral discourse for self-promotion. The grandstander is not primarily trying to establish Truth or advance justice. They are trying to signal moral respectability and superiority to an in-group.

Crucially, this is not a partisan diagnosis. Joshua Grubbs, working with Warmke, Tosi, Shanti James and W. Keith Campbell, tested it empirically across six studies in [‘Moral Grandstanding in Public Discourse: Status-Seeking Motives as a Potential Explanatory Mechanism in Predicting Conflict’](#) (2019), published in PLOS ONE, including nationally representative and YouGov samples running into thousands of participants. Grandstanding motivation tracked status-seeking personality traits — narcissistic extraversion for prestige-seeking, narcissistic antagonism far more strongly for dominance-seeking — and predicted greater political and moral conflict in daily life. Their multi-study follow-up, [‘Moral Grandstanding and Political Polarization: A Multi-Study Consideration’](#) (2020), published in the Journal of Research in Personality, linked the same motives to affective polarisation and ideological extremism, in both directions of the political spectrum.

Let me be very clear about that last point, because it is where most commentary on this subject dies. The finding is not "my opponents grandstand." The finding is that status-seeking through moral talk is a *human* behaviour that recruits the same personality substrates regardless of which flag it flies under. If you have ever felt the particular electric warmth of posting something righteous and watching the numbers climb, you have been inside the machine. So have I.

Tosi and Warmke identify the characteristic tactical moves, and once you see them you cannot unsee them. **Ramping up**: escalating the moral claim beyond the previous speaker's, so that condemnation becomes an auction. **Trumping up**: manufacturing or catastrophising an offence to demonstrate superior moral sensitivity. **Piling on**: joining a condemnation already underway, to register allegiance — and, more importantly, to avoid being next.

Piling on is the tell. It is not moral action. It is *insurance*.

The reward loop is engineered

William Brady, Killian McLoughlin, Tuan Doan and Molly Crockett demonstrated the mechanism across two preregistered observational studies on Twitter — 7,331 users, 12.7 million tweets — and two preregistered behavioural experiments in [‘How Social Learning Amplifies Moral Outrage Expression in Online Social Networks’](#) (2021), published in *Science Advances*. Positive social feedback for expressions of outrage increased the likelihood of *future* outrage expressions, exactly as reinforcement learning predicts. Users also conformed their outrage to the expressive norms of their networks, so norm learning shaped it too. And in ideologically extreme networks, where outrage was already common, users became *less* sensitive to feedback — the behaviour had become intrinsic.

Their conclusion is quietly devastating: users with politically moderate networks were the most sensitive to the reinforcement, which supplies a mechanism by which moderate people become radicalised over time.

Crockett's summary of the business logic is exact: amplification of moral outrage is a clear consequence of a model that optimises for engagement.

So we have built, at civilisational scale, an operant conditioning chamber that rewards the precise behaviour that a shadow-driven psyche most wants permission to perform.

What it actually is

The evolutionary psychologist Glenn Geher, in [‘Cancel Culture in Evolutionary Perspective’](#) (2023), describes a public cancellation for what it structurally is: large-scale, coordinated social estrangement — the ancient ritual of ostracism, running at the speed of light and with a permanent archive.

Girard would recognise it instantly. The community is in undifferentiated crisis. Rivalry is everywhere. And then the mechanism does its work: the many-directional hostility polarises spontaneously onto one vulnerable figure. The person is translated from a human being into a single transgression. The verdict must be unanimous — that is why dissent from the verdict is treated as complicity in the crime, and why "I don't know enough about this to judge" is heard as a confession. Unanimity is not a by-product of cancellation. It is the *requirement*.

And then the expulsion works. Cohesion returns. Everyone feels cleaner.

Under the guise of ethical vigilance, the persecuting collective enacts the very cruelty it condemns. By destroying the transgressor, the participant temporarily silences their own internal prosecutor. That is the counterfeit absolution — and it is counterfeit precisely because it is temporary, which is why another target will be required soon.

The judgement is the confession. Every time you judge someone, you are revealing the part of yourself that has not yet been met.

Table 1 · Three frameworks, one mechanism — and the blind spot each one requires.

Framework	Mechanism	Function it performs	Structural blind spot
Jungian depth psychology	Shadow projection	Defends the ego against awareness of its own disowned impulses by locating them in the neighbour	Believes the evil resides entirely in the external target
Girardian anthropology	Mimetic scapegoating	Resolves internal rivalry by unifying the collective through expulsion of a single victim	Believes the victim is uniquely guilty and solely responsible
Tosi & Warmke (2016) ; Grubbs et al. (2019)	Moral grandstanding	Leverages condemnation and punitive escalation to secure social status and signal in-group virtue	Believes self-promoting moral talk is purely altruistic

Now the fence, because this is where honesty gets expensive

I am not arguing that accountability is illegitimate. I am arguing almost the opposite.

Accountability is a *relationship*. It involves the naming of an act, a proportionate consequence, an opportunity for repair, and the survival of the person's humanity throughout. Cancellation is not a stronger form of accountability. It is a *substitute* for it — the thing you reach for when repair is either impossible or unwanted, and the pleasure being sought is not correction but annihilation.

Second, the term itself is contested and frequently weaponised. Powerful people who face ordinary criticism, ordinary market consequences, or ordinary loss of an audience routinely describe themselves as cancelled while retaining every platform they ever had. Journalists have noted for years that the phrase has been used so promiscuously in political rhetoric that it functions as background noise, and that many people described as cancelled prevail comfortably in the end. Any serious use of the concept has to survive that objection, and mine does, because I am not defending the powerful from consequences. I am describing what a crowd is doing to *itself*.

Third, and most importantly: **the harm is not symmetrically distributed**. The person with lawyers, capital and an independent audience is inconvenienced. The junior employee, the trainee, the person with no institutional protection, the person already carrying the ACE score — that person is destroyed, and quietly, and without a headline. The mechanism's cruelty is inversely proportional to the target's power, which is precisely what Girard would predict, because the scapegoat has always been selected for vulnerability rather than for guilt.

So the honest statement is this. Some public condemnations are justified. Many are accountability theatre performed by frightened people for status. And the reliable way to tell them apart is not the content of the accusation but the *shape of the process*: whether dissent

is permitted, whether the person remains a person, whether proportion is observed, whether repair is available, and whether anybody in the crowd is willing to say *and I might be wrong*.

If the answer to all five is no, that is not justice.

That is a stoning with better production values.



Plate VI · A stoning with better production values. Count the shadows before you count the people: every raised phone throws the shadow of a rock. The screen at the edge of the square shows the crowd its own image, because being seen to participate is most of the point. On the right, one man has lowered his phone and is looking at his own hand. He has no idea that he is the most important person in the square.

Count the shadows before you count the people. Every raised phone throws the shadow of a rock, which is the only honest way to draw what is happening, and the screen at the edge of the square is showing the crowd its own image, because being seen to participate is most of the point. But look at the right-hand edge. One man has lowered his phone and is staring at his own open hand, and he has no idea that he is the most important person in the square. He is not defending her. He does not know the facts. He is simply, for one moment, declining to make the verdict unanimous — and unanimity is the only thing this machine cannot run without.

Cancel the cancelling

There is a way out, and it is not another crusade.

The way out of the drama is to lean away and to respond in your own time, if at all — never to react. Take time to breathe. Become present. Presence takes you out of the Karpman Drama

Triangle entirely, because the Triangle has only three chairs — Victim, Rescuer, Persecutor — and every one of them requires you to have accepted a role in someone else's play.

Imagine a hula hoop around you. Everything inside it is your business. Everything outside it is somebody else's. What other people think of you is genuinely none of your business, and obsession with what cannot be controlled is one of the reliable engines of suffering.

Anyone who buys into cancellation is, in the most practical sense, not your person. The mechanism therefore performs an accidental service: it sorts. Let the dead leaves drop.

Just cancel the cancel culture. It has nothing to do with you.

VIII. The Myth of Neutrality in Law

Now take everything established so far — a fractured psyche, a body that keeps the score, projection seeking permission, hate as an epistemology, ontological arrogance, denial that is functionally necessary, and a scapegoat mechanism that has gone digital — and place it inside the one institution our civilisation has designated as the arbiter of Truth.

The legal profession has long clothed itself in the doctrine of neutrality: the belief that judges, lawyers and decision-makers can, through discipline and training, rise above their own minds. This belief is foundational. It animates judicial oaths, professional ideals, and public faith in the justice system.

It is also the most fragile assumption in the entire architecture of law, because it rests not on science but on myth — a myth steadily dismantled by neuroscience, cognitive psychology, behavioural economics, trauma studies and jurisprudential theory across more than half a century.

Objectivity, as the law imagines it, presupposes a mind capable of detachment. But the brain is never detached. It is embodied, affective and interpretive. It filters every perception through memory, emotion, expectation and prior experience — structures laid down long before the person put on a robe, signed a training contract, or rose to address the court.

The nervous system does not stop being itself just because the job requires it.

And this is the quiet Truth at the heart of the neutrality myth: **the legal system is built upon a model of the human mind that does not exist.**

The jurisprudence knew first

The law's own theorists reached this conclusion long before the laboratories confirmed it.

Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., in ['The Path of the Law'](#) (1897), collapsed the formalist illusion in a single sentence: the prophecies of what the courts will do in fact — and nothing more pretentious — are what he meant by the law. Not a logic machine. Not deduction from eternal principle. What human beings in robes actually *do*.

Jerome Frank, in [‘Law and the Modern Mind’](#) (1930/1963), went further and drew explicitly on psychoanalysis. He attacked what he called the basic legal myth — that judges simply apply clear rules to clear facts — and argued that judicial decisions are profoundly shaped by the psychology and personal history of the judge. The written opinion, in Frank’s account, functions largely as an elaborate post-hoc rationalisation, dressing a subjective hunch in the authoritative language of precedent.

Arthur Selwyn Miller, in [‘The Myth of Objectivity in Legal Research and Writing’](#) (1969), published in the *Catholic University Law Review*, generalised the critique beyond judging altogether. Legal research, case selection and doctrinal synthesis are all value-laden activities. What counts as a relevant case, a persuasive precedent or a coherent line of authority is shaped by the researcher’s assumptions and institutional commitments. Neutrality, on this account, is not merely a judicial myth. It is an epistemology-wide professional myth.

Roberto Mangabeira Unger, in [‘The Critical Legal Studies Movement’](#) (1986), and the Critical Legal Studies movement extended the analysis from individual psychology to ideological architecture. Legal doctrine is inherently indeterminate and contradictory, a contested terrain built atop unacknowledged political, cultural and economic choices; liberal legalism’s claim to neutrality is an institutional mystification. CLS scholars pointed out that nineteenth-century laissez-faire rulings reflected the interests of capital rather than neutral market principle, and that the categories of property and contract conceal the economy and ideology that produced them.

Critical Race Theory made the same move on race. Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Richard Delgado and others showed how facially race-neutral rules can reproduce racial hierarchy — how a doctrinal focus on demonstrable intentional discrimination can extinguish structural remedies, and how colour-blindness at the level of rules can function as blindness to outcomes. Bell’s concept of interest convergence — that majority groups advance minority rights principally when it serves their own interests — exposes how contingent and strategic “neutrality” has often been.

Feminist jurisprudence made it on gender. Catharine MacKinnon’s critique in [‘Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law’](#) (1987) of facial neutrality holds that laws written in gender-neutral language can obscure the real inequalities women face; a gender-neutral domestic-violence provision, applied to structurally unequal parties, can be turned against the person it was drafted to protect. The general principle is old and inescapable: treating unequals equally is not equality. It is the ratification of a head start.

The common ground across all of these traditions is not a shared politics. It is a shared observation: **no legal system is value-free, because none was built in a vacuum, and none is staffed by minds that were.**

What the laboratories added

What the behavioural sciences contributed was not a new idea but an anatomy.

Daniel Kahneman’s synthesis of his work with Amos Tversky in [‘Thinking, Fast and Slow’](#) (2011) demonstrated that human reasoning is not a neutral weighing of facts but a constant

negotiation among heuristics, framing and unconscious bias — and that expertise does not confer exemption.

Chris Guthrie, Jeffrey Rachlinski and Andrew Wistrich took the point directly to the bench. In their empirical study of 167 federal magistrate judges, ['Inside the Judicial Mind'](#) (2001), they showed that judges are subject to the same classic cognitive illusions as everyone else: anchoring, framing effects, hindsight bias, egocentric bias, representativeness. Judges evaluating settlement options shift with gain-or-loss framing. Judges who know an outcome systematically overestimate how predictable it was — which is precisely the bias that corrupts assessments of negligence and probable cause. Bernd Englich, Thomas Mussweiler and Fritz Strack demonstrated across three anchoring experiments in ['Playing Dice with Criminal Sentences: The Influence of Irrelevant Anchors on Experts' Judicial Decision Making'](#) (2006) that experienced legal professionals' sentencing decisions could be moved by anchors that were blatantly random.

Rachlinski, Sheri Lynn Johnson, Wistrich and Guthrie then administered the Implicit Association Test to 133 trial judges in the empirical study ['Does Unconscious Racial Bias Affect Trial Judges?'](#) (2009), published in the Notre Dame Law Review. Three findings emerged, and the third is the one that matters. Judges hold implicit racial biases. Those biases can influence their decisions. And judges can partially correct for them **when the biases are made salient**.

Jerry Kang, Mark Bennett, Devon Carbado and colleagues synthesised the literature in the review ['Implicit Bias in the Courtroom'](#) (2012), published in the UCLA Law Review, moving the conversation decisively away from bad apples and towards systemic vulnerability: implicit bias is pervasive, largely unconscious, and structurally embedded across courtroom processes — in charging, in jury selection, in credibility assessment, in sentencing.

One study, honestly handled

I want to deal carefully with the most famous piece of evidence in this field, because how a writer treats an inconvenient literature is itself a test of the thesis.

Shai Danziger, Jonathan Levav and Liora Avnaim-Pesso published the observational study ['Extraneous Factors in Judicial Decisions'](#) (2011), in PNAS: 1,112 Israeli parole rulings across fifty days, in which the probability of a favourable decision fell from roughly sixty-five per cent at the start of a session to near zero before a food break, and rebounded afterwards. It became instantly canonical, and it is cited everywhere — including, in earlier drafts, by me — as proof that justice depends on what the judge had for breakfast.

It has been seriously challenged, and honesty requires saying so.

Keren Weinshall-Margel and John Shapard, in the reply ['Overlooked Factors in the Analysis of Parole Decisions'](#) (2011), argued from interviews with parole personnel that case ordering was not random: unrepresented prisoners, who prevail far less often, typically appear last in a session, and boards tend to finish all cases from one prison before breaking. Andreas Glöckner, in the simulation study ['The Irrational Hungry Judge Effect Revisited: Simulations Reveal That the Magnitude of the Effect Is Overestimated'](#)

(2016), published in *Judgment and Decision Making*, ran simulations showing that an effect of similar magnitude could be produced by a wholly rational judge who declines to start a case likely to run long just before a break — meaning the observed pattern may be substantially a statistical artefact of favourable rulings taking longer. Danziger and colleagues replied in ['Reply to Weinshall-Margel and Shapard: Extraneous Factors in Judicial Decisions Persist'](#) (2011) that the downward trend persists when representation is controlled for, though they did not report whether the magnitude survives intact.

Where does that leave us? With a genuinely contested effect whose size has almost certainly been overstated, sitting inside a much larger body of evidence — the anchoring studies, the hindsight studies, the framing studies, the implicit-bias studies — that is *not* contested in the same way.

Which means I do not need the hungry judge. And I would rather lose him than keep him dishonestly.

Because the argument was never that judges are hungry. The argument is that judges are *human*, and that a system founded on the assumption that they are not will be blindsided precisely where it feels most confident.

The literature that looks at this — and looks the other way

There is an entire trauma-informed-courts movement now: SAMHSA's GAINS Center on how being trauma-informed improves judicial decision-making, the bench cards of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, North Carolina's Chief Justice's Task Force on ACEs-Informed Courts, work out of Duke's Bolch Judicial Institute. It places adverse childhood experience and judicial decision-making inside a single frame, and it does genuinely good work.

But look at where the instrument is pointed. It is pointed at the people in the dock and in the waiting room. It tells judges that the person before them may be carrying trauma, and asks them to respond accordingly. The prevalence data it cites concerns justice-involved populations — and those figures are stark; justice-involved young people carry adversity loads several times higher than their peers.

What that literature does not do, so far as I have been able to find, is turn the same instrument around.

Judges and lawyers are recruited from the general population. In the general population, six in ten adults report at least one adverse childhood experience and roughly one in six report four or more. Judicial cognition is demonstrably permeable to influences that have nothing to do with law. Put those three findings in a row and a conclusion follows that the trauma-informed-courts movement has not, to my knowledge, drawn: the doctrine of strong judicial neutrality is not merely aspirational but untenable, and it is untenable for reasons internal to the very evidence base the courts have already accepted about everybody else.

The bench has adopted trauma-informed practice as something it does *to* others. This essay asks what happens when the lens is reversed. That reversal is not a criticism of the movement. It is the next move the movement has not yet made.

Neutrality is not the absence of bias

Here is the reformulation the whole section exists to reach.

António Damásio's work in ['Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain'](#) (1994) on the somatic marker hypothesis showed that emotion is not a contaminant added to reasoning but a *condition* of real-world reasoning. Patients with damage to emotion-processing regions can reason abstractly and still make catastrophic decisions in life. The Cartesian split on which the ideal of disembodied judicial neutrality rests is not merely difficult to achieve. It is neurologically incoherent.

Trauma science completes the picture. A nervous system trained in childhood to scan for danger cannot simply *elect* neutrality; the amygdala fires before reason arrives. A person shaped by emotional neglect may default to detachment as self-protection and experience that detachment, from the inside, as impartiality. Someone raised amid unpredictability may perceive ambiguity as threat, and experience a craving for certainty as principled rigour.

These patterns do not announce themselves. They present as personality, as work ethic, as legal instinct. They are biography wearing the mask of logic. And what the law calls *discretion* is frequently the nervous system deciding faster than consciousness can register.

So neutrality collapses — not because lawyers and judges are biased, but because they are human. And because they are human, they carry nervous systems shaped by childhood, attachment, temperament and experience, which arrive in the courtroom not as confessions but as tones of voice, thresholds of patience, interpretations of credibility, reactions to challenge, comfort with ambiguity, susceptibility to narrative.

None of this eradicates professional integrity. It relocates it to where it always belonged: in the willingness to recognise one's own mind.

Neutrality is not the absence of bias. It is the absence of awareness.

And the absence of awareness is the most fertile ground imaginable for the reproduction of childhood patterns, trauma adaptations and unconscious emotional logic. A profession that cannot name its own emotional architecture cannot steward Truth. A justice system that imagines itself above psychology becomes a theatre of hidden biographies.

The danger is not that judges and lawyers are human.

The danger is the belief that they are not.

Institutions are belief-machines

There is one further move, and it belongs to the historian Rutger Bregman in [‘**Humankind: A Hopeful History**’](#) (2020). His observation, in essence, is that everything begins with your view of human nature, because what you assume about other people tends to be what you get out of them — so if you assume most people are fundamentally selfish and untrustworthy, you will design institutions around that assumption, and you will manufacture exactly the people your assumption presupposed.

Institutions are never neutral containers. They are belief-machines.

Adversarial law is built upon an anthropology: the presumption that people are unreliable, self-serving, and best managed through threat, scrutiny and punishment. Even where that presumption is pragmatically necessary, it is never psychologically cost-free — because it does not merely *describe* behaviour, it *trains* behaviour. A system continuously searching for bad faith becomes exquisitely skilled at eliciting bad faith. A culture that treats vulnerability as weakness produces people who cannot tell the Truth without armour: identified with the persona rather than the person, the mask rather than the Self.

Which is why "neutrality" so often functions as a costume. Beneath it sits a fearful metaphysic about what human beings are.

Waking the law begins by changing that metaphysic — not into naïve optimism, but into clinically mature realism. Human behaviour is context-dependent, nervous-system-dependent, attachment-dependent. And what we repeatedly expect, we reliably cultivate.

IX. Ego Scaling: The Frightened Child Builds a Fortress and Grows Old Enough to Call It Civilisation

How does a private wound become a public institution?

Not, I want to be careful to say, by magic and not by metaphor alone. A civilisation does not possess an infant nervous system. A university does not literally dissociate. A regulator does not have an attachment style. The claim that a profession is a scaled traumatised ego should remain a structural homology, argued as a homology, never smuggled in wearing a lab coat.

But institutions can perform functionally homologous defensive operations — threat detection, image defence, exclusion of anomaly, projection of blame, suppression of dissent, rigidification under threat, ritualisation, jurisdictional defence and compulsive self-preservation — and those operations can emerge from interactions among people without every participant sharing the same childhood.

The accurate formulation is therefore not that a wound becomes a bigger wound. It is this: **defensive adaptations become selected, socially synchronised, normatively rewarded, codified into roles and procedures, and recursively reproduced by systems that then exert downward pressure on everyone who arrives afterwards.**

Which yields the most important consequence in this entire essay, and the answer to the obvious objection that not every surgeon, lawyer or judge had a difficult childhood.

They do not have to.

The institution can become the carrier. Once a defensive phenotype is encoded in recruitment, training, status, language, procedure and sanction, people who did not arrive with it can acquire it as the price of belonging. The original wound no longer needs to be present for the defence to reproduce.

That is what institutionalisation actually means.

The door does the sorting

There is one piece of establishment evidence for the selection step that no one can dismiss as advocacy.

Laura Empson is Professor in the Management of Professional Service Firms at Bayes Business School, a research fellow at Harvard Law School's Center on the Legal Profession, a former investment banker, and has sat on a Big Four board. Over twenty-five years she has conducted more than five hundred interviews with senior professionals in elite law firms, accountancy firms, consultancies and investment banks.

Writing in the Harvard Business Review article ['If You're So Successful, Why Are You Still Working 70 Hours a Week?'](#) (2018, February 8), she reported that elite professional organisations deliberately identify and recruit what she calls **insecure overachievers**: people who are exceptionally capable and fiercely ambitious yet driven by a profound sense of their own inadequacy. Some firms, she noted, use that exact term — though, in her words, not in public.

She locates the origin of the insecurity in childhood, including in a belief that parental love was contingent upon behaving and performing well. She explains the appeal in commercial terms: such people are entirely self-motivating and self-disciplining. And she describes the closing of the loop — by the time insecure overachievers become the leaders of their organisations, they unconsciously reproduce the systems of social control and overwork that produced them.

That is ego scaling, published by an establishment insider with no stake whatsoever in my thesis.

One thing Empson does not do, and which I do here. She locates insecure overachievement in childhood — including, in her words, in a belief that parental love was contingent on behaving and performing well — but she does not connect that observation to the research literature on conditional regard, and she does not connect it to adverse childhood experience at all. Assor, Roth and Deci had already measured precisely the construct she is describing, four years before her book and fourteen before the article. Nobody, as far as I can find, has drawn the line between them.

That bridge — recruitment findings from elite professional firms, conditional-regard research from self-determination theory, and ACE epidemiology, joined into one causal account — is drawn here for the first time as far as I know, and I would like it tested.

Anxiety laundering

The Tavistock tradition, following Isabel Menzies Lyth, established decades ago that an institution can organise its procedures as a collective defence against anxiety. What that account leaves implicit is the *direction of travel*.

Anxiety in a hierarchy does not disperse. It descends. And at each level it is converted into a form that allows the level above to stop feeling it.

A board's fear of scandal becomes a policy. The policy becomes a target. The target becomes a manager's pressure. The pressure becomes a junior's impossible week. And at the bottom of the cascade, where there is nobody left to pass it to, the anxiety arrives at a twenty-six-year-old with a name attached: *your* performance issue, *your* resilience gap, *your* failure to cope.

That is laundering. Fear enters the top of the institution as an institutional condition and leaves the bottom as a personal defect, cleaned of its origin at every transfer.

And because the terminal holder has nowhere to pass it, the cascade generates precisely the burnout statistics the same institution will later commission a wellbeing programme to address — a programme aimed, inevitably, at the resilience of the person the fear was laundered onto.

The wellbeing programme is not the solution to anxiety laundering. It is the final stage of it: the point at which the institution's fear is returned to the individual as a curriculum in bearing it better.

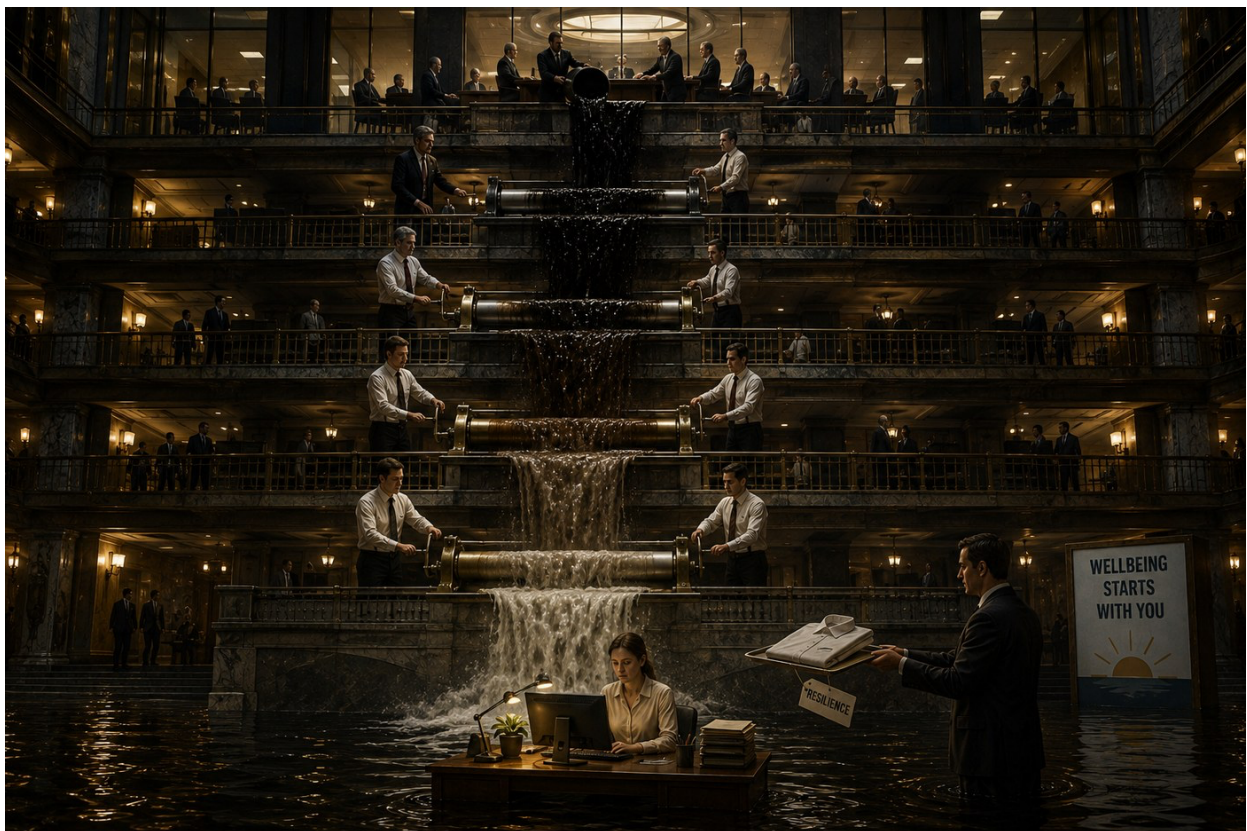


Plate VII · Anxiety laundering. Follow the shirts. At the top the men are in jackets; at each landing below, the sleeves are rolled further and the work gets wetter, and the collars above stay startlingly

white — because the whole apparatus exists to keep them that way. At the bottom the floor runs out. She is sitting in the water it was all wrung from, being handed a clean folded shirt labelled RESILIENCE, beneath a poster explaining that wellbeing starts with her.

Follow the shirts. At the top the men are in jackets, and at each landing below the sleeves are rolled a little further, and the work gets wetter, and the collars stay startlingly white — because the whole apparatus exists to keep them that way. Nobody on those balconies is doing anything they would recognise as harm. They are managing, escalating, cascading, and each of them has genuinely reduced the pressure on the person above. And then the floor runs out. She is sitting in the water it was all wrung from, being handed a clean folded shirt with a label on it, beneath a poster explaining that wellbeing starts with her.

I should be candid about how much of that is already known, because both halves of it are.

The first half is Tavistock's. Menzies Lyth showed in the empirical organisational study [**'Social Systems as a Defense Against Anxiety'**](#) (1960) that a hospital's nursing service had organised its procedures — task-splitting, ritual, depersonalisation, the diffusion of responsibility from the individual nurse to the system as a whole — as a defence against primitive anxiety. Everything I have said about institutions converting anxiety rather than metabolising it descends from that paper.

The second half belongs to the critical-wellbeing literature, and it is unsparing. Mark Fisher, in [**'Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?'**](#) (2009), named the privatisation of stress: the systematic conversion of a political condition into a private pathology. Carl Cederström and André Spicer's [**'The Wellness Syndrome'**](#) (2015) showed how wellness operates as a moral command that turns responsibility inward and, in doing so, indemnifies the structures that produced the distress. William Davies traced the same logic in [**'The Happiness Industry: How the Government and Big Business Sold Us Well-Being'**](#) (2015). Brad Evans and Julian Reid did it in [**'Resilient Life: The Art of Living Dangerously'**](#) (2014). Behind them stand Arlie Hochschild in [**'The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling'**](#) (1983), the governmentality tradition on responsibilisation, and Frank Furedi's [**'Therapy Culture: Cultivating Vulnerability in an Uncertain Age'**](#) (2004). Christina Maslach and Michael Leiter, in the research review [**'Understanding the Burnout Experience: Recent Research and Its Implications for Psychiatry'**](#) (2016), synthesised decades of evidence that burnout is an organisational rather than an individual phenomenon — a position the World Health Organization ratified in [**'Burn-Out an "Occupational Phenomenon": International Classification of Diseases'**](#) (2019, May 28), when ICD-11 defined burn-out as a syndrome resulting from chronic *workplace* stress that has not been successfully managed, and specified that it refers to phenomena in the occupational context.

So neither the descent nor the wellbeing critique is mine.

What I am claiming is the **join**, and the direction. Anxiety laundering names a single directional process running the length of a hierarchy, in which fear is relabelled at each transfer until it arrives at the bottom as a personal defect — and in which the wellbeing programme is not the reversal of that process but its final stage. The institution's fear, having descended, is returned to the individual as a curriculum in bearing it better.

That last sentence is the one I would defend. The laundering metaphor is mine; the two halves it joins are common property.

The rigidity trap

The most useful vocabulary for what happens next comes, improbably, from forest ecology.

In the adaptive-cycle model developed by C. S. Holling and elaborated by Lance Gunderson and Holling in ['Panarchy: Understanding Transformations in Human and Natural Systems'](#) (2002), complex systems move through four phases: growth, conservation, release and reorganisation. In conservation, a system accumulates connectedness and efficiency. It becomes more organised, more interlocked, more optimised — and, in the literature's precise phrase, increasingly stable but over a decreasing range of conditions.

Flexibility is the price of efficiency.

When potential, connectedness and resilience are all high and there is no room left for experiment, the system enters a **rigidity trap**: a maladaptive attractor in which the very features that made it strong now prevent it from adapting. Its resilience has been replaced by artificial maintenance — levees instead of floodplains, chemical control instead of ecological balance, audit instead of trust.

A profession in a rigidity trap is not failing. It is succeeding, at enormous cost, within a range of conditions that is quietly narrowing every year — and it experiences each new procedure as a strengthening.

That sentence describes the modern regulated professions with a precision no insider account has managed, and it comes from the study of forests.



Plate VIII · The rigidity trap. Every gantry was installed in good faith, by someone acting after something went wrong, and from inside the accumulation reads as maturity. The levee holds the water off the apron. Beyond it the forest stands in floodwater and is full of birds — not protected, and therefore alive. And there is a crack in the concrete running from the door to the wall.

Every single one of those gantries was installed by someone acting in good faith after something went wrong. That is what makes the rigidity trap so hard to argue anyone out of: each additional binding was a proportionate response to a real failure, and the people at the lit windows are working diligently and well, and from inside, the accumulation reads as maturity. Meanwhile the levee holds the water off the apron, and beyond the levee the forest is standing in floodwater and is full of birds. The forest is not being protected. That is why it is alive. And there is a crack in the concrete running from the door to the wall.

Panarchy also supplies the two cross-scale connections that explain the whole recursive structure. **Revolt:** a small, fast cycle entering collapse can cascade upward and trigger crisis in the larger, slower level above — the individual breakdown that becomes a departmental crisis that becomes a regulatory inquiry that becomes a national scandal. And **remember:** a larger, slower cycle supplies the memory, structure and material from which a collapsed smaller cycle reorganises.

Remember is the answer to the question that haunts every survivor's story. Why does the person who was broken by the system rebuild the system? Because the only material available for reorganisation is what the larger, slower system has stored. A person emerging from collapse reaches for structure, and the structure to hand is the one that produced the collapse.

Not because they are foolish.

Because it is the only structure there is.

Reform-as-isomorphism

Which brings us to the most quietly devastating finding in organisational sociology, and the reason so many reforms produce another version of the thing they were reforming.

Paul DiMaggio and Walter Powell, in the classic institutional-theory paper ['The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields'](#) (1983), published in the American Sociological Review, asked why organisations in the same field come to resemble one another so closely. Their answer: three pressures — coercive, from regulators and funders; mimetic, through imitation under uncertainty; and normative, through professional training and accreditation — drive convergence, and that convergence makes organisations more similar without necessarily making them more efficient. Their formulation of the paradox is the line to keep: rational actors make their organisations increasingly similar as they try to change them.

Notice what that means for anyone reforming a profession from inside. **The reform effort is itself an isomorphic pressure.** Under uncertainty, reformers imitate reforms that have acquired legitimacy elsewhere. The trauma-informed policy, the wellbeing strategy, the resilience module, the values framework: each is adopted because it is legitimate, not because it worked.

Which is why every trauma-informed declaration should be audited against funding, referral capacity, supervision, service-user power and outcomes. Without that audit, a trauma-informed institution is simply an institution that has completed the current isomorphic cycle.

Institutional autoimmunity

One further homology, offered as a homology and not as biology.

An immune system distinguishes self from not-self and destroys the second. Autoimmunity is the failure of that distinction: the system begins destroying the tissue it exists to protect, using precisely the apparatus designed for protection. It is not a malfunction of the defence. It is the defence, working correctly, on a target it has misidentified.

A defended institution identifies as not-self exactly those members who carry the information it most needs — the whistleblower, the reflective practitioner, the one who cannot stop feeling, the trainee who asks the question in the seminar. These are the cells carrying the antigen: the news that something is wrong. And the institution attacks them with its protective apparatus — the fitness-to-practise referral, the capability procedure, the reference that damns with faint competence, the informal knowledge that *this one is difficult*.

The attack is experienced internally as immune function. Standards being upheld. The public being protected.

That is what makes it autoimmune rather than merely cruel. Nobody involved believes they are attacking the organism. They believe they are defending it, and their belief is sincere.

Sincerity, once again, is the symptom.

What it costs the practitioners

The bill for all of this arrives, eventually, in the bodies of the people who staff the machine.

The landmark study remains Patrick Krill, Ryan Johnson and Linda Albert's national cross-sectional survey for the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation and the American Bar Association Commission on Lawyer Assistance Programs, ['The Prevalence of Substance Use and Other Mental Health Concerns Among American Attorneys'](#) (2016), published in the Journal of Addiction Medicine: 12,825 licensed, employed attorneys. Around one in five screened positive for hazardous, harmful or potentially dependent drinking on the AUDIT — and on a frequency-focused variant of the instrument, over a third qualified as problem drinkers. Twenty-eight per cent reported symptoms of depression; nineteen per cent, anxiety; twenty-three per cent, stress.

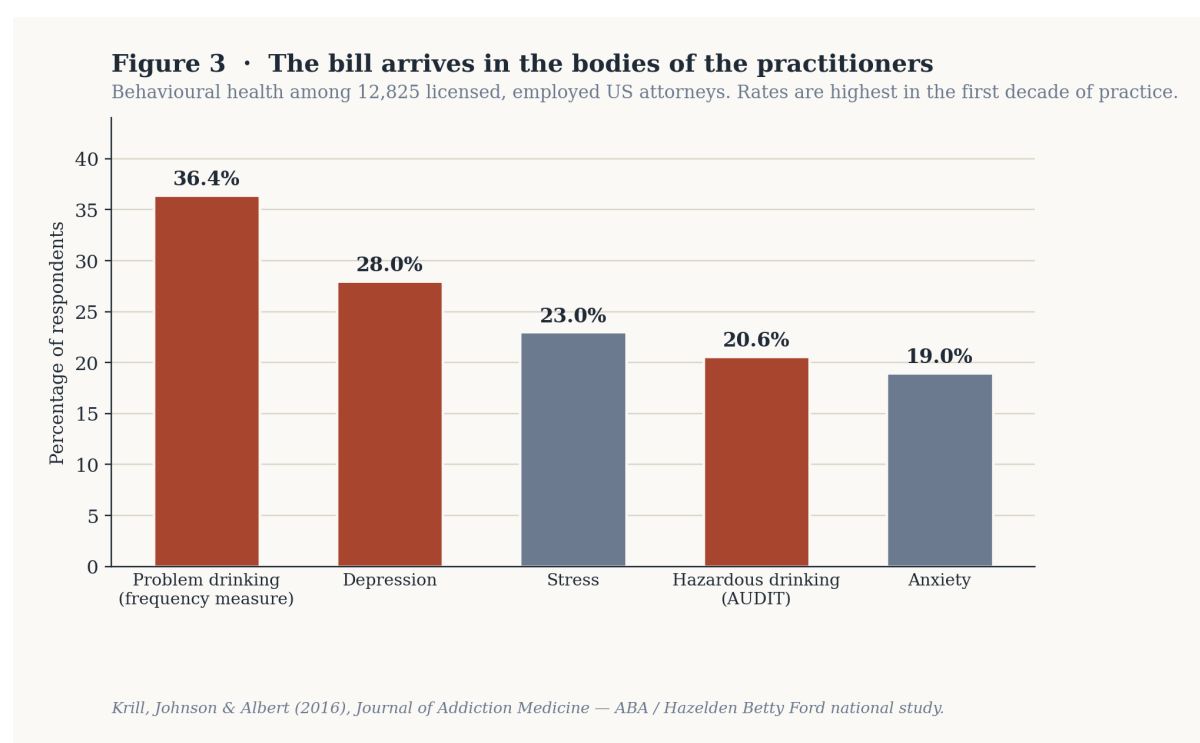


Figure 3. Behavioural health among US attorneys. Data: [Krill, Johnson & Albert \(2016\)](#), Journal of Addiction Medicine.

And the reversal in that data is the finding that should have changed everything. Previous research had suggested problem drinking increased with years in the profession. Krill's data showed the opposite: the *youngest* lawyers, in their first decade, now show the highest rates.

Read that as an epidemiologist would. If exposure duration were the driver, the veterans would be sickest. They are not. Which means the damage is being done at the *entrance* — in the selection, the training, the socialisation, the first years of learning what the profession rewards.

The door is doing the sorting. And then the corridor is doing the rest.

Krill's own summary was blunt: the data paints the picture of an unsustainable professional culture that is harming too many people.

That was a decade ago. The numbers have not improved.

X. The Reverse Panopticon

We can now go back and read the scene in the Temple properly, because we finally have the equipment.

The opening is legal before it is psychological. The woman is not brought to Jesus by people who simply dislike adultery. She is presented *through authority*: "**Moses in the law commanded us.**" The narrative itself tells us the question is a test, designed to produce grounds for accusation. Exactly which jurisdictional trap is intended has been debated for centuries, and there is no need to claim more certainty than the text supplies. What matters for the drama is plain enough: Jesus is being required to enter a prepared adjudicative frame.

And even the legal presentation is already strange. Biblical adultery legislation attaches liability to *both* parties to the act. Yet only one body has been deposited in the middle of the scene. The missing man should make any careful reader hesitate before treating this as a complete prosecution file.

The forensic apparatus makes one vulnerable body visible while allowing the surrounding architecture to fade into obscurity.

That is not an ancient failing. That is Tuesday.

Jesus then does something infuriatingly un-lawyerly.

He does not answer. He stoops. He writes on the ground.

The text never tells us what he wrote — and Christian imagination has spent centuries helpfully supplying the missing exhibit. Perhaps the accusers' sins. Perhaps their names. Perhaps a scriptural text. Perhaps something devastating in Aramaic. We do not know. The Gospel does not disclose it, and hermeneutical discipline demands that the silence remain silence.

Perhaps the silence is itself sufficient.

The room has been organised as a prosecution. There is an accused. There are accusers. There is a cited authority. There is a demanded ruling. There is a crowd. And he does not accept the geometry. He bends out of it.

This is not a first-century nervous-system regulation technique, and I will not pretend otherwise. It means only this: the adversarial machinery has been offered to him, and he declines to climb into the driving seat.

Which is, when you consider it, the rarest act in public life.

Only when they persist does he rise: "**He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her.**"

Notice precisely what has happened, because almost everyone misreads it.

He has not disputed that conduct matters. He has not declared the law void. He has not defended her, argued for her, or attacked them.

He has changed who is visible.

The gaze had been travelling in one direction: many eyes upon one body. Now the moral question travels *backwards along the line of sight*.

Jeremy Bentham designed the Panopticon so that a single unseen inspector could watch many; Michel Foucault, in ['Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison'](#) (1975/1977), showed how the design migrated inward, until the watched subject internalises the inspector and polices themselves. That is the inner panopticon this essay began with — the conditional parental voice installed as permanent surveillance.

What happens in the Temple is its exact inversion. **The Reverse Panopticon**: the gaze directed at the accused is turned back toward its source. The inspector enters the field of inspection. The watcher becomes visible to the watcher.

Foucault is not hiding under a fig tree in John 8, and Jesus is not anticipating ['Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison'](#) (1975/1977). But read after Foucault, the structural resonance is almost impossible not to see.

One clarification, since surveillance theory already has a term in this neighbourhood. Thomas Mathiesen's synopticon, developed in ['The Viewer Society: Michel Foucault's "Panopticon" Revisited'](#) (1997), describes the many watching the few — the viewer society, mass media, the crowd's eyes on the celebrity. That is not what I mean. Steve Mann, Jason Nolan and Barry Wellman's sousveillance, developed in ['Sousveillance: Inventing and Using Wearable Computing Devices for Data Collection in Surveillance Environments'](#) (2003), describes the watched turning their instruments back on the watchers, which is closer but still a matter of who holds the equipment. The Reverse Panopticon, as I use it, is neither: it is the moment when the *moral* question travelling along a line of sight reverses direction, so that the party doing the inspecting is abruptly inside the field of inspection — not because anyone has redistributed the cameras, but because a single sentence has made exemption impossible.

The phrase itself is loose in general usage and I make no claim to have coined it. What I am claiming is this specific sense, and the reading of John 8 that produces it.

And the consequence is precisely what Girard's theory predicts. The crowd was about to become one body. Unanimity was the operating requirement. Instead, the question is returned to each person *singly* — and in the King James tradition, being convicted by their own conscience, they go out one by one, beginning at the eldest.

(That conscience phrase is itself a textual variant, belonging to the received text rather than to every form of the wandering pericope. The *movement*, however, survives in all of them: they hear, and they leave, one at a time.)

One by one is the whole miracle. The mob is de-mimeticised. It dissolves back into individual moral agents, each abruptly alone with their own interior.

Not a rescue. A dismantling of the mechanism, by the simple refusal to let it be unanimous.



Plate I · The Reverse Panopticon. The stone is caught in the instant of release. Behind it the ring is already dissolving — not as a crowd, but one by one, each man walking out alone into his own shaft of light, his shadow stretching back toward himself. In the colonnade the inspection tower stands lit from outside: the watcher, at last, visible to the watcher. On the plinth, a lamp that someone aimed. Through the arch, a sun that nobody owns.

Look at what the light is doing in that courtyard. There is a lamp on the plinth, and its beam is narrow, aimed, owned — someone lit it, someone pointed it, and it falls on exactly one woman. Then there is the sun coming through the arch, which nobody lit and nobody aimed, and which is falling on the accusers and the accused in precisely equal measure. That is the whole argument of this book compressed into a lighting decision. And the tower is the detail I would not lose: the inspector is still in his chamber, still at his window, still doing his job. The only thing that has changed is that he is now lit from outside.

Andersen, and where the Gospel goes further

The structure rhymes with Hans Christian Andersen. An entire court conspires in a collective hallucination, each person terrified of being judged unfit for office, until a child trusts immediate perception over institutional conformity.

But John 8 advances beyond Andersen, and the difference is the most important thing in this essay.

In Andersen's tale, the Emperor *recognises the Truth and proudly marches on*. Clarity arrives; the pivot to ethical agency fails. The procession continues, because the cost of stopping is higher than the cost of the lie.

In John 8, the accusers are interrupted. Their certainty fractures. And they drop their stones. Insight without agency is just a better-informed procession.

The jurisprudence of grace

When they have gone, he addresses her directly — and this is the passage that ought to be studied in every law school on earth.

"Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more."

The Greek verb is *katakrinō*: to pronounce an adverse, punitive judicial sentence — the kind of verdict that fixes the ontology of a person to their offence.

Watch what is being uncoupled.

Retributive legalism collapses the person entirely into the act: you *are* what you did, permanently, and the appropriate response is annihilation. Moral permissiveness denies the act or its consequences, infantilising the agent and erasing responsibility.

The Johannine move refuses both. It withholds ontological condemnation while affirming moral agency and requiring future change. Conduct is named. Consequence is not pretended away. And the human being survives the naming.

She is not declared behaviourless. She is released from being her behaviour.

That distinction — between accountability and condemnation, between the act and the ontology — is the single most practical idea in this entire essay, and our institutions have almost entirely lost it. Our disciplinary systems, our criminal justice, our regulators and our comment sections all operate on *katakrinō*: they do not merely sanction an act, they issue a verdict on a Soul. And a person who has been ontologically condemned has no route back, which is precisely why so few of them ever change. We have removed the exit and then complain about recidivism.

Immediately afterwards comes the declaration: **"I am the light of the world."**

Not a better spotlight. The light of the cosmos — unowned, unaimable, illuminating accusers and accused within the same field.

The Sun shining upon the spotlights.

XI. The Ladder of Non-Retaliation

Everything so far has been diagnosis. Here is the instrument.

In 1969, Donald Winnicott read a paper to the New York Psychoanalytic Society that half the audience found incomprehensible and which has since become one of the most important short texts in psychoanalysis. It is ['The Use of an Object'](#) (1969), and it describes a sequence.

The infant relates to an object. The infant destroys the object — in unconscious fantasy, continuously, with maximum destructiveness and no protection offered. The object *survives*. And only then, because it survived, can the object be **used**: it has been placed outside the area of the infant's omnipotent control, and has thereby become real, external, other, capable of contributing something the infant did not put there.

And Winnicott adds a gloss, in parentheses, almost in passing, which is the most important thing in the paper:

"Survive", in this context, means "not retaliate."

Read what that does.

Survival is not endurance. It is not winning the argument, absorbing the blow, or outlasting the attack. It is the specific refusal to strike back.

An object that retaliates has not survived, however intact it looks afterwards. It has proved itself still inside the subject's omnipotent field — a projection, an extension, a thing that exists only in relation to the attack. It never becomes real. It can never be used. And the relationship stays forever inside the head of the person doing the destroying.

Now scale it

Winnicott did not write institutional theory. The scaling is mine, and I flag it as mine so no future reader mistakes it for received scholarship. But the structure is scale-invariant, and once you see it at four levels you cannot stop seeing it.

The child and the parent. The destruction is the child's rage, refusal, hatred, testing — offered without protection. Survival is a parent who remains: unfrightened, unpunishing, still there in the morning. Retaliation is withdrawal of love, or counter-rage — and the child concludes that the parent is not survivable, and builds a 'false self' to protect the parent *from the child*.

The trainee and the profession. The destruction is the question in the seminar, the doubt, the refusal to pretend the emperor is dressed. Survival is a profession that answers the question and keeps the questioner. Retaliation is the marking, the reputation, the quiet word — and the trainee learns that the profession is not real, only performable.

The whistleblower and the institution. The destruction is the disclosure, the evidence, the naming of what everyone already knows. Survival is investigation, acknowledgement, apology, structural change — and the discloser still employed. Retaliation is Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender: the institution proving it was never an object, only a defended self.

The prophet and the civilisation. The destruction is the one who says what the culture has organised itself not to say. Survival is a culture that metabolises the saying and is changed by it. Retaliation is expulsion — followed, in Girard's bitterest observation, by veneration of the expelled, which sanctifies the mechanism and permits it to run again.

Same grammar. Four scales.



Plate IX · The Ladder of Non-Retaliation. One ladder runs the whole height, because it is one grammar at four scales. The block is still in the air. The hand is still raised. The folder is on the table and the shadows have already resolved into a single pointing finger. At the top, the crowd has turned its back while the scaffolding goes up around the statue of the man they are walking away from.

Figure 4 • The Ladder of Non-Retaliation

Winnicott, 1969: "survive", in this context, means "not retaliate."



The Retaliation Test: do not ask what an institution values. Ask what it does to the person who names the problem.

Scaling of Winnicott's formulation is the author's; the psychoanalytic source is Winnicott (1969), *The Use of an Object*.

Figure 4. The Ladder of Non-Retaliation and the Retaliation Test, after [Winnicott \(1969\)](#).

The Retaliation Test

From this falls a single diagnostic, and it is the reason to write any of this down.

Do not ask what an institution values. Do not read its charter, its mission statement, its trauma-informed policy or its wellbeing strategy. Ask one thing: what does it do to the person who destroys it in fantasy — who criticises it, doubts it, exposes it, names it? Whatever it does to that person is what it is.

Four properties make this worth building a practice on.

It is **observable**. Retaliation leaves a paper trail: referrals, references, settlement agreements, non-disclosure clauses, capability procedures, and the revealing arithmetic between the date a concern was raised and the date a process began.

It is **scale-invariant**. The same test applies to a parent, a supervisor, a department, a regulator and a state. That is what a genuine scaling mechanism looks like: one instrument, every level.

It is **already measured**. Jennifer Freyd's DARVO is retaliation specified precisely enough to be coded and counted, and institutional DARVO is that manoeuvre performed by an organisation.

And it **cannot be gamed by stated values**. An institution can write anything into a policy. It cannot fake what it does at four o'clock on the afternoon a junior puts something in writing.

Now the honest part, which strengthens the instrument rather than weakening it.

I am not the first person to think that an institution reveals itself in what it does to the one who exposes it. Jennifer Freyd's research programme has been building exactly that diagnostic for years, and building it empirically. Institutional betrayal is formalised in ['Institutional Betrayal'](#) (2014), while the Institutional Courage Questionnaire and the evidence that institutional courage buffers against betrayal and protects employee health after workplace harassment are developed in the empirical study ['Institutional Courage Buffers Against Institutional Betrayal, Protects Employee Health, and Fosters Organizational Commitment Following Workplace Sexual Harassment'](#) (2023). There is, in other words, already a functionally equivalent and considerably better-evidenced tool in the world than the one I am proposing, and a reader who reaches for it instead of mine will lose nothing.

Around Freyd sits a large organisational literature saying compatible things from other angles: Amy Edmondson in ['Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams'](#) (1999), James Detert and Ethan Burris in their two-phase field study ['Leadership Behavior and Employee Voice: Is the Door Really Open?'](#) (2007), Elizabeth Morrison and Frances Milliken in ['Organizational Silence: A Barrier to Change and Development in a Pluralistic World'](#) (2000), Marcia Miceli, Janet Near and Terry Dworkin in ['Whistle-Blowing in Organizations'](#) (2008), C. Fred Alford in ['Whistleblowers: Broken Lives and Organizational Power'](#) (2001), Robert Jackall's ['Moral Mazes: The World of Corporate Managers'](#) (1988) on the moral universe of corporate managers. The recurring finding in that body of work is one this essay would predict: a workplace can prohibit retaliation in policy while thoroughly normalising it in practice, and look entirely compliant while remaining unsafe.

And the Winnicottian half is not untouched either. The Tavistock and group-relations traditions have long extended survival-without-retaliation from the nursery to the consulting room and to the stance of the analyst.

So what is left that is mine? Two things. The **scaling** — four discrete levels, one grammar, from the nursery to the civilisation, so that a single instrument runs the whole ladder rather than being rebuilt at each rung. And the **compression** into a test that a person can apply on a Tuesday afternoon without a questionnaire, a research ethics application or a budget.

That is a smaller claim than the one I might have made. It is also a claim I can defend, and the convergence is the point: when psychoanalysis, experimental psychology and organisational sociology arrive independently at the same proposition, that is not coincidence. That is the proposition being true.

Freyd also supplies the constructive half, arrived at independently, by an experimental psychologist, from an entirely different direction. Her antidote to institutional betrayal is **institutional courage**: an institution's commitment to seek the Truth and engage in moral action, despite unpleasantness, risk and short-term cost.

That is Winnicott's non-retaliation, rendered operational.

Three traditions — psychoanalytic, empirical-psychological and anthropological — converging on one proposition: **a thing becomes real at the moment it declines to retaliate against what attacks it.**

That convergence is not decoration. It is the strongest evidential structure this argument has.

I should add one honest qualification. It is tempting to declare that no elite profession has ever survived being destroyed without striking back. It is rhetorically glorious, and empirically universal, and a single counterexample would turn a profound insight into a hostage. So I put the Retaliation Test forward not as a verdict already delivered, but as a proposed diagnostic — and I invite the institutions concerned to submit to it.

Dissolution is not death

One last correction, because in its usual form this argument is true and unusable.

The standard version says: recognition of this evidence at full depth is not merely costly to institutions but *dissolutive*; an institution asked to concede that its founding categories are downstream artefacts is being asked to dissolve; and organisms do not consent to their own dissolution, so they defend.

Every clause of that is correct. But notice what it does to the reader who happens to run one of these institutions. It tells them the price of honesty is death, and then expresses surprise when they choose dishonesty.

Given those two options, so would anyone. So would you. So would I.

The error is in the word *dissolution*, and the correction comes from the same forest ecology that gave us the rigidity trap. **Dissolution is not death. It is the third phase.** Release, in the adaptive cycle, is not the failure of a system; it is the phase through which a system reorganises and continues. What kills a system is not release. What kills it is staying in conservation — optimising, tightening, controlling, becoming ever more stable across an ever-narrower range of conditions until a disturbance arrives that the narrowed range cannot contain, and then collapsing all at once.

So what has to dissolve is not medicine, law, rigour, expertise or standards.

What has to dissolve is the fear-organised *form* in which those functions have petrified.

The profession keeps its expertise. The telescope remains. The robe remains.

The worship ends.

The First Cathedral proves itself by retaliating. The Second Cathedral becomes real by surviving the Truth.

Table 2 · *The First Cathedral and the Second Cathedral.*

Dimension	The First Cathedral (adversarial)	The Second Cathedral (awakened)
Anthropological premise	Humans are selfish and untrustworthy, governed only by fear of punishment	Human behaviour is context-, attachment- and nervous-system dependent; capacity for good flourishes under safety
Epistemic model	Cartesian detachment; the myth of disembodied neutrality; doctrine applied mechanically	Embodied, affective cognition; reflexive awareness of heuristics and personal biography
Forensic illumination	Prosecutorial spotlight; the observer disappears behind the beam while the accused is exposed	The Sun upon the spotlights; all parties stand exposed within the same universal light
Treatment of transgression	Ontological reduction; the person is collapsed into the act; retributive scapegoating	Accountability uncoupled from condemnation; the act is named, consequence enforced, humanity preserved
Response to challenge	Proves itself by retaliating	Becomes real by surviving the Truth
Operating question	An eye for an eye: what does the other deserve?	What would love do now?

XII. The Child in the Midst

There is another human being standing "in the midst," and we should meet her upstream, before she arrives in the Temple.

In Matthew 18, nobody has been caught committing anything. Nobody is being prosecuted. No stone has been lifted. The disciples have simply asked a very human question: *Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?*

And Jesus answers by calling a child.

Not by giving a lecture on hierarchy. Not by proposing a revised competency framework for spiritual leadership. Not by convening a working group to establish the measurable attributes of Kingdom Greatness, with stakeholder consultation to follow.

He calls a child. And Matthew says: **"and set him in the midst of them."**

The Greek is as physical as the English: he summons a *paidion* and stands the child *en mesō autōn*, in their midst. The question was about who stands highest. He answers by changing who stands in the middle.

That is not decoration. The child is the answer.

We should be careful not to make the child say things Matthew does not say. This is not a modern theory of childhood innocence. Real children are gloriously human: they attach, fear, imitate, compete, rage, conform, delight, sulk, and occasionally attempt to establish absolute sovereignty over a biscuit. The point is not that the child possesses a perfect ego. Matthew supplies the controlling interpretation himself: unless they *be converted* — the Greek *straphēte*, meaning to turn, to change direction — and humble themselves as this little child. The movement is not toward childishness. It is *away from the organising grammar that produced the question*.

They ask how high they can become. He turns them toward the small.

The child does not win the competition. **The child makes the competition look strange.**

And then he goes further: **"whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me."**

That word — *receive* — carries the whole argument of this essay.

The child is not asked to qualify for reception. The child is received.

Conditional love says: become what the room requires, and then perhaps the room will receive you.

Here, the little one is put in the room *first*.

Reception precedes achievement.

Every mechanism described in these pages — projection, the grievance looking for a cause, the epistemology of hate, ontological arrogance, denial, the scapegoat, the adversarial courtroom, the insecure overachiever, the laundered anxiety — every single one of them grows in the soil of the opposite proposition. Every one of them is what happens downstream of a world in which reception must be earned, and can be revoked, and is therefore never safe.

Matthew asks what happened on the road.

John asks what we do with the person once she has fallen.

XIII. The Pivot: *I AM*, and *Sum, Ergo Diligo*

The chapter's climax is not the woman, and not the stones. It is a claim about being.

The interlocutors keep invoking lineage: *Abraham is our father*. And Jesus subjects the credential to a behavioural test — do not tell me whose tradition you inherit; show me what your inheritance makes you *do*. Ancestry and institutional credentials possess no moral value whatsoever if what they produce, under pressure, is hatred and retributive violence.

Then he transcends predicate-bound identity altogether: **"Before Abraham was, I am."**

Prin Abraam genesthai, egō eimi. The formulation is a central Christological declaration of the Fourth Gospel, echoing the divine name of Exodus 3:14, and it should not be trivialised

into a slogan of Self-actualisation. Respecting its theological magnitude is part of reading it honestly.

But philosophically and jurisprudentially, it is also an ontological liberation, and that is the register in which I want to receive it here.

Every institutional system attempts to define a human being through predicates: ancestry, role, professional title, diagnostic label, criminal record, credit score, economic utility, protected characteristic, case number. The ego does the same job internally, assembling an identity from achievement, approval, appearance, belief and belonging.

I AM asserts that **being precedes all of it.**

Which quietly subverts Descartes. *Cogito, ergo sum* makes existence a derivative of mental activity — and a civilisation organised around that proposition will inevitably rank human beings by cognitive output and call the ranking meritocracy. But thinking arises from the prior fact of existing, not the reverse.

And yet resting purely in ontological being risks collapsing into detached abstraction. Being has to *go somewhere*. So the recovery of Being finds its necessary ethical expression in active love:

Sum, ergo diligo. I AM, therefore I love.

The intersubjective turn

Two philosophers make this concrete.

Martin Buber, in ['I and Thou'](#) (1923/1937), insisted that all real living is meeting. In an *I–It* orientation, the other is an object of utility, classification, diagnosis or litigation. In an *I–Thou* encounter, the other is met as an irreducible living presence. When an adversarial legal system or a clinical environment relates to a human being solely through categories of culpability or pathology, it solidifies the *I–It* world and treats Souls as box-shaped roles.

Emmanuel Levinas, in ['Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority'](#) (1961/1969), went further and made ethics first philosophy. Philosophy does not begin in epistemology or ontology; it begins in the encounter with the face of the Other. The face issues an ethical summons that precedes rational deliberation: it commands non-violence and demands responsibility. To reduce the Other to a category, an offence, or a scapegoat is to commit epistemic and moral violence before a single blow is struck.

Which is exactly what the accusers had done before they arrived. She had already been translated from person into case. The stone was merely the last step in a process that began the moment she stopped having a face.

The Pivot itself

Between the two stones lies the possibility of what I call the Pivot: the moment when the persecuting gaze turns around, the watcher becomes visible to the watcher, and the hand holding the weapon pauses.

The Pivot does not occur because fear vanishes from the nervous system. Fear does not vanish. It occurs when **fear ceases to possess monopoly rights over human action.**

Fear may still vote. The wound may still speak. The body may still shake.

But none of them gets all the seats. You have returned to the chamber.

And this is why agency remains real: because the stone is still lying on the earth, and the hand remains entirely capable of lifting it. Retaliation stays possible. If love were compulsory there would be no agency in choosing it, and therefore no *Will to Love* at all.

Agency does not mean control over what happens. It does not mean omnipotence. It does not mean that trauma, circumstance, illness, economics, law or the behaviour of others suddenly disappears.

Agency is authorship of the next available act.

At the Pivot, that authorship can return immediately, even though the crossing may take years.

The narrow way

There is a paradox here worth protecting.

Jesus describes the way that leads to life as narrow. Revelation offers the complementary image: *I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it.* Isaiah gives the embodied instruction: *This is the way, walk ye in it.*

The door is infinitely open, yet the way is narrow. That sounds contradictory only while freedom is imagined as unlimited optionality.

But perhaps the narrowness is not coercion. Perhaps it is coherence.

There are ten thousand things I could do in the next moment. I could attack, withdraw, perform, placate, punish, prove, hide, control, lie. I could rehearse and ruminate. I could take the drug, the promotion, the accolade, the litigation, the revenge. Fear creates a spaghetti junction, because fear requires constant navigation among imagined threats inherited from a legacy system. Every fork produces another defended fork; every strategy demands another strategy; every defended solution generates another problem requiring another defended solution.

And then one question does something almost offensively simple:

What would love do now?

Suddenly the ten thousand exits become one direction — not because anyone has forced you onto it.

The narrow way is narrow precisely because you are free.

At every moment you *could* choose fear. You could retaliate. You could humiliate. You could abandon yourself. You could put the robe back on. The Emperor could continue the procession — and in Andersen, he does. That is what makes agency agency.

The path became narrow and straight not because there were no forks, but because the same compass was brought to every fork.

Infinite agency can produce a narrow path. Not because the alternatives were removed. Because love repeatedly chooses coherence.

Fear forks. Love coheres.



Plate X · The fork. To the left: gardens, a library, people talking at tables, a woman kneeling at eye level beside a man in distress, and walls inscribed know thyself and the unexamined life is not worth living. To the right: monitors, riot shields, cells, and a creed that belongs to nobody — obedience is safety, conformity is protection, deviation is risk. One floor runs between them; nothing is sealed. The light falls from an oculus that neither wing owns, onto a tree standing exactly at the fork. Nobody is standing on the path, because this is not a picture of somebody else's decision.

Both roads are open. That is not a detail; it is the entire moral architecture of this book. Nobody is being herded down the left-hand path and nothing bars the right, and the two wings are not sealed from one another — one continuous floor runs between them, which is why a person can cross at any time, in either direction, and why so many people spend their lives doing exactly that. Notice what the light is doing, because it is doing the same work here as it did in the Temple: it falls from an oculus that neither wing owns, onto a tree standing precisely at

the fork, and the signpost nailed to that tree gives the only four directions anyone has ever actually needed. And notice who is standing on the path. Nobody is. The path is empty because this is not a picture of somebody else's decision.

XIV. What This Asks of You Tomorrow Morning

None of this is worth writing if it stays in the sky. So let me bring it down.

Withdraw the projection before you act on it. The next time a person's behaviour produces in you a moral heat disproportionate to the event, treat the disproportion as data about you, not about them. This is not moral masochism; it is calibration. Ask the question that Epictetus asked two thousand years before we had a word for it: when you are offended at another's fault, turn to yourself and study your own failings. Then decide what to do. You may still need a boundary. You may still need to act. But act from the ground, not from the flinch.

Refuse the geometry. When you are handed a prepared adversarial frame — the demand for an immediate ruling, the escalating thread, the invitation to pile on — do not climb into the driving seat. Stoop. Write in the dust. Not responding is a response. Respond, do not react. Never make a decision from an anxious state; your peace is more important than your position.

Break the unanimity. If a crowd is forming around a person, the single most useful thing you can do is decline to be the next voice. You do not have to defend them. You do not have to know the facts. You only have to refuse to make the verdict unanimous — because unanimity is the mechanism's operating requirement, and one dissenting voice can de-mimeticise a mob.

Separate the act from the ontology. Name conduct. Enforce consequence. Do not issue a verdict on a Soul. *Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more* is not softness; it is the most demanding position available, because it requires you to hold accountability and humanity in the same hand.

Apply the Retaliation Test — including to yourself. Ask what your organisation does to the person who names the problem. Ask what *you* do when someone destroys you in fantasy: criticises you, doubts you, exposes you. Do you remain, unpunishing, still there in the morning? Or do you go quiet, go cold, withdraw the reference, mark the card? Whatever you do to that person is what you are.

Practise ontological humility deliberately at the point of maximum certainty. Kofman is right that it is not the natural attitude of a human being, which is exactly why it must be a discipline rather than a mood. The moment you are most sure is the moment to say: *this is my view, and there may be a reality I am not seeing.*

Feel first. Think second. Then choose. Then walk. There are forms of understanding that arrive whole before they arrive grammatically. You recognise that a person is frightened before you have formulated the inference. You know a room has changed before anyone explains why. The error is not thinking; the error is letting thought assume that whatever it

cannot yet dissect cannot be known. Let the whole arrive before the cutting begins — then let reason come back and check the map. Not as king. As servant.

And if you are the target: what other people think of you is none of your business. Imagine a hula hoop around you; everything inside it is yours to tend, everything outside it belongs to somebody else. You are not obliged to carry another person's emotional baggage, and you are not required to metabolise a projection that was never about you. Lean away. Take your time. Let the dead leaves drop.

If you are the hater — and at some point every one of us has been — the door is not locked. It never was. You hold the key to the prison you constructed. The route out is not self-flagellation, which is merely the projection turned inward and just as unproductive. The route out is compassion, beginning with yourself, because we can only extend to others the regard we have first learned to survive receiving.

Coda: The Stone Is Still on the Earth

We are all guilty of exactly one thing: having the human condition.

And in that shared guilt lies both our humanity and our innocence.

Law is the human condition laid bare, which is why we should be grateful for it even when the adversarial system fails to show compassion. Nothing uniquely monstrous has gone wrong with you. This is what it is like to be human in a traumatised culture, in institutions built by frightened children who grew old enough to call their fortresses civilisation.

Fear scales by reproducing the defence.

Love scales when the defence can survive being questioned without reproducing the wound.

The stone remains lying upon the earth, and the hand remains entirely capable of lifting it. Agency is real precisely because retaliation is still possible.

But in the silence between the hand and the stone, a human being can step out of the mechanical repetition of trauma, projection and institutional violence, and recover the capacity to author an unscripted future.

Before every predicate, there is the irreducible ground of being: **I AM.**

And from that ground arises the only question a court, a comment section, a regulator, a parent or a person has ever actually needed to ask:

What would love do now?

A Note on Method

This essay is written under a two-handed rule: **one hand in the Earth, the other in the Sky.** The Earth Hand asks whether a claim is factually true, what evidence supports it, what I

may be projecting, and whether I might be wrong. The Sky Hand is permitted to reach beyond what the evidence alone can carry — but never while wearing a lab coat.

Accordingly, the claims above fall into distinct tiers, and I have tried to keep them visibly distinct rather than smoothing them into a single confident voice.

Established — replicated across independent samples and methods, and would survive hostile review: the dose–response relationship between cumulative childhood adversity and adult outcomes; the prevalence of adverse childhood experience in general populations; the presence of standard cognitive biases in expert legal decision-makers; the existence of implicit bias among judges; the reinforcement dynamics of online outrage; the association between moral grandstanding motivation and status-seeking traits.

Supported, with stated limitations — consistent evidence, but with heterogeneity, contested moderators, or reliance on cross-sectional and retrospective design: parental conditional regard and its affective costs; institutions functioning as collective defences against anxiety; professional cultures socialising emotional distancing.

Contested — and flagged as such in the text rather than in the small print: the magnitude of the "hungry judge" effect, which has been seriously challenged and is probably substantially overstated.

Structural homology — argued as homology, never as identity: institutional autoimmunity; the application of ecological adaptive-cycle theory to professions; the scaling of Winnicott's non-retaliation from the nursery to the regulator. A civilisation has no infant nervous system. A regulator has no attachment style. These mappings are offered because they are useful and structurally exact, not because institutions literally possess biology.

Openly appropriated — used with acknowledgement that the source community may object: the reading of *I AM* (Exodus 3:14; John 8:58) as ontological liberation, which takes a theological declaration and puts it to philosophical work.

Visionary and load-bearing — metaphysical propositions the architecture openly rests upon, argued in the open: *Sum, ergo diligo*; the Will to Love; the Pivot; the claim that compassion is the cure for the human condition.

A full novelty audit follows this note, conducted against my own work and published rather than filed; it names the nearest neighbour for every original claim and states what would falsify each one. In summary, two coinages in this essay are mine and are marked as mine so that no future reader mistakes them for received scholarship: **anxiety laundering** (built on the Tavistock tradition) and **hermeneutical enclosure** (built on Miranda Fricker). The **Reverse Panopticon**, the **Retaliation Test**, the **grievance looking for a cause**, the **First and Second Cathedral**, **ego scaling** and **to noetise** are likewise my own naming of the territory, standing on the shoulders of the scholars cited below.

On Novelty: The Trans-Paradigmatic Principle

A reader is entitled to ask what, in all this, is actually new — and an author who cannot answer that question precisely has usually not looked. I have looked. What follows is the audit, conducted against my own work, and published rather than filed.

What trans-paradigmatic means

To be **trans-paradigmatic** is to unbox the disciplines, join them up, and make the joints carry weight.

That last clause is the whole discipline of it. Anyone can put epidemiology next to exegesis on a page. The question is whether the join bears load — whether removing one domain would collapse the argument or merely shorten it. In this essay, remove the ACE data and the claim about judicial neutrality loses its floor. Remove the ecology and the account of institutional rigidity loses its mechanism and becomes a complaint. Remove John 8 and the whole thing has a diagnosis with no reversal in it. The domains are not decoration on a thesis. They are the thesis.

The journey required to do this unlinks the disciplines into something wider than any of them, which is how one gets to anything worth calling Truth. It is also, I should say plainly, why the work required a wound. There is wisdom in wounds, because the pharmacy has to be walked to. Nobody crosses seven fields for fun.

I should distinguish this from an established term it will be mistaken for. **Transdisciplinarity** — Piaget's coinage, developed by Jantsch, Nicolescu in [‘Manifesto of Transdisciplinarity’](#) (2002), Nowotny, Julie Thompson Klein in [‘Prospects for Transdisciplinarity’](#) (2004), and the Mode 2 knowledge-production account of Gibbons and colleagues in [‘The New Production of Knowledge’](#) (1994) — is a serious and well-populated field, split roughly between a Nicolescuian school concerned with ethics and levels of reality and a Zurich school concerned with integrating academic and non-academic knowledge to solve real-world problems. That field is largely about **problem-solving with stakeholders**. What I am describing is nearer to Kuhn's [‘The Structure of Scientific Revolutions’](#) (1962): the deliberate crossing of *paradigm* boundaries, including between paradigms that are not commensurable and do not share standards of proof — running odds ratios and *egō eimi* through the same argument without pretending either is the other.

Our civilisation is not yet trans-paradigmatic, which is one reason it is not yet civilised. It has specialised brilliantly and integrated badly. Each discipline holds a spotlight and mistakes its beam for the sky. A civilisation, like a person, has its own Hero's Journey to make, and the crossing it has not made is the one from expertise to wisdom — from knowing in fragments to knowing as a whole.

The audit, claim by claim

The Retaliation Test and the Ladder of Non-Retaliation. *Survives with qualification.* The diagnostic principle is substantially anticipated by Jennifer Freyd's institutional betrayal and institutional courage programme, which has validated instruments where I have an

aphorism, and by the organisational voice-and-silence literature. What survives is the four-level scaling and the compression into something usable without a research protocol.

Hermeneutical enclosure. *Survives as synthesis and name, not as discovery.* That interpretive gaps are structural, actively maintained, and institutionally produced is established scholarship — Fricker, Pohlhaus, Dotson, Anderson, Medina, Mills, Tuana, Catala, Carel and Kidd. What survives is the concept-factory taxonomy and the reflexive lock: the gap-maker is the mandated recipient of the report.

Anxiety laundering. *Survives as a coinage; the argument is largely anticipated.* Menzies Lyth supplies the descent; Fisher, Cederström and Spicer, Davies and Evans and Reid supply the wellbeing critique. What survives is the join, the direction of travel, and the terminal move in which the wellbeing programme completes the laundering rather than reversing it.

The third explanation of institutional harm. *Needs qualification.* Agentless, structurally produced harm is well established under other names — Vaughan above all. What survives is the mechanism-level formulation in Girardian terms, and the minimal operating conditions that leave no defendant to prosecute.

The span. *Survives.* Individual pairings all have precedent: trauma science and law in therapeutic jurisprudence, law and theology and narrative in Robert Cover, mimetic theory and law in Girardian legal studies, restorative justice and theology in Zehr and Marshall, panarchy applied to organisations in the resilience literature. The closest of them reaches three or four domains. I have not found a single argument carrying epidemiology, judicial cognition, organisational sociology, resilience ecology, epistemic injustice, psychoanalysis and Johannine exegesis on one load-bearing arc. **That span, not any of its constituent joins, is what I claim as new.**

The adjacency of ACEs and the bench. *Survives with qualification.* The trauma-informed-courts literature already places adversity data in the courtroom, but aimed at litigants. Turning it on the judiciary, and bridging Empson's insecure overachievers to conditional-regard research and ACE epidemiology, appears not to have been done.

Naming. *Mixed.* "Reverse Panopticon" is in loose circulation and is not mine to claim; the specific sense given here is. "Ego scaling" collides with the unrelated psychometric constructs of ego resiliency and the quiet ego, and I flag the collision rather than pretend it away. "Anxiety laundering", "hermeneutical enclosure", "the Ladder of Non-Retaliatio", "the Retaliatio Test", "the First Cathedral" and "the Second Cathedral" appear unused in the scholarly literature, though the absence of a phrase from a search is weaker evidence than its presence.

Table 3 · The novelty ledger — nearest neighbour, verdict, and what survives.

Claim	Nearest neighbour in the literature	Verdict	What survives as mine
The Retaliation Test / Ladder of Non-Retaliation	Freyd (2014) , institutional betrayal; Smidt, Adams-Clark & Freyd (2023) , institutional courage (IBQ, ICQ); Edmondson (1999) ; Detert & Burris (2007) ; Morrison & Milliken (2000) ; Alford (2001) ; Jackall (1988)	Survives with qualification	The four-level scaling from nursery to civilisation, and compression into a test usable without a research protocol
Hermeneutical enclosure	Fricker (2007) , Fricker (2016) ; Pohlhaus (2012) , wilful hermeneutical ignorance; Dotson (2012, 2014) , contributory injustice; Anderson (2012) ; Medina (2013) ; Mills (2007) ; Catala (2015) , hermeneutical domination	Survives as synthesis and name, not discovery	The concept-factory taxonomy, and the reflexive lock: the gap-maker is the mandated recipient of the report
Anxiety laundering	Menzies Lyth (1960) ; Fisher (2009) , the privatisation of stress; Cederström & Spicer (2015) ; Davies (2015) ; Evans & Reid (2014) ; Maslach & Leiter (2016) ; WHO ICD-11 (2019)	Survives as coinage; argument largely anticipated	The directional join, and the terminal move in which the wellbeing programme completes rather than reverses the laundering
The third explanation of institutional harm	Vaughan (1996) , normalisation of deviance; Arendt ; Bauman (1989) ; Bandura (1999) ; Galtung (1969) ; Argyris (1990) ; Cohen (2001) ; Bourdieu (1991)	Needs qualification	The Girardian mechanism-level formulation, and the minimal operating conditions that leave no defendant
The trans-paradigmatic span	Wexler & Winick (1996) ; Cover (1983, 1986) ; Palaver (2013) ; Zehr and Marshall (2001) ; Panarchy (2002) applied to organisations — closest reach three to four domains	Survives	Seven domains on one load-bearing arc; the strongest claim made here, and the easiest to falsify
ACE prevalence turned on the bench	SAMHSA GAINS Center ; NCJFCJ bench cards; trauma-informed courts — all aimed at litigants	Survives with qualification	Reversing the lens onto the judiciary; bridging Empson to conditional-regard research and ACE epidemiology

Claim	Nearest neighbour in the literature	Verdict	What survives as mine
Naming	Mathiesen (1997) , synopticon; Mann, Nolan & Wellman (2003) , sousveillance; Block & Kremen (1996) , ego resiliency; transdisciplinarity (Piaget, Nicolescu (2002) , Klein (2004))	Mixed	The specific sense of the Reverse Panopticon; the coinages not found in the scholarly literature

Where this is all Sky Hand

Some of what follows the Earth Hand cannot carry, and I would rather say so than let a reader discover it and feel handled.

The claim that **compassion is the cure for the human condition** is not an empirical finding. It is a metaphysical position, and I hold it.

Sum, ergo diligo — I AM, therefore I love — is not derived from anything above it. It is asserted. So is the Will to Love, and so is the Pivot: the proposition that agency returns the instant fear loses its monopoly, even when the crossing takes years. No study establishes that. I believe it because I have watched it happen, including in myself, which is testimony rather than evidence.

The reading of *I AM* as ontological liberation is a philosophical appropriation of a theological declaration, and readers for whom Exodus 3:14 and John 8:58 are load-bearing scripture are entitled to think I have taken something holy and used it as a tool. I have tried to signal the magnitude rather than flatten it, but the appropriation is real and I do not disguise it.

The four-level Ladder is a **structural homology**, not a biology. A civilisation has no infant nervous system. A regulator has no attachment style. Institutional autoimmunity is an analogy that illuminates; it is not an immunological finding, and anyone who cites it as one has misread me.

And the assertion that the narrow way is narrow *because* you are free, rather than in spite of it, is a piece of moral phenomenology that I can describe but cannot prove.

These are the places where I have let go of the Earth. I have marked them so that a reader who wants only the evidence can stop at the marks, and a reader who wants the whole thing knows exactly what they are being offered.

The register problem, and my answer to it

The obvious objection to a piece like this is that it asks one reader to accept confidence intervals and *egō eimi* in the same breath. The secular academic may bail at John 8. The

devotional reader may bail at the odds ratios. Publishing it entire, in one register-crossing arc, guarantees that some of both will leave.

I have decided that is acceptable, for a reason I want to state rather than hide.

The two-handed method is not a compromise between those readers. It is a claim that the split between them is itself a symptom — the same disciplinary enclosure this essay spends fourteen sections describing, showing up in the reader instead of the institution. A civilisation that cannot hold measurement and meaning in one mind will keep building institutions that can hold only one, and those institutions will keep producing exactly the harms catalogued here.

So to anyone who puts it down at the seam: no hard feelings, and good luck to you. But notice what made you stop. That armour is heavy. You are allowed to take it off.

What would change my mind

Finally, the discipline that makes the rest of this honest. Here is what would falsify or downgrade the claims above, stated in advance so that nobody has to take my word for anything.

If a published use of "hermeneutical enclosure" or "anxiety laundering" surfaces in the literature, those drop from coinage to *needs distinguishing*. If a law-review article is found making the ACE-prevalence-undermines-judicial-neutrality argument about judges themselves, that claim drops from *survives* to *anticipated*. If a paper in the psychoanalytic-organisational tradition is found scaling Winnicott's non-retaliation across nested institutional levels, the Ladder weakens from instrument to reformulation. And if a single work is found running all seven domains through one load-bearing arc, the span claim — the strongest one I make — fails entirely, and I will say so in print.

I would rather be corrected than be quoted.

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*This essay discusses childhood adversity, professional burnout and psychological distress. If any of it lands close to home, please treat that as information rather than as indictment — and consider speaking to a doctor, a therapist, or someone you trust. In the UK, LawCare supports legal professionals; general support is available through your GP and the NHS. **Reception precedes achievement. That includes you. You are worthy.***

