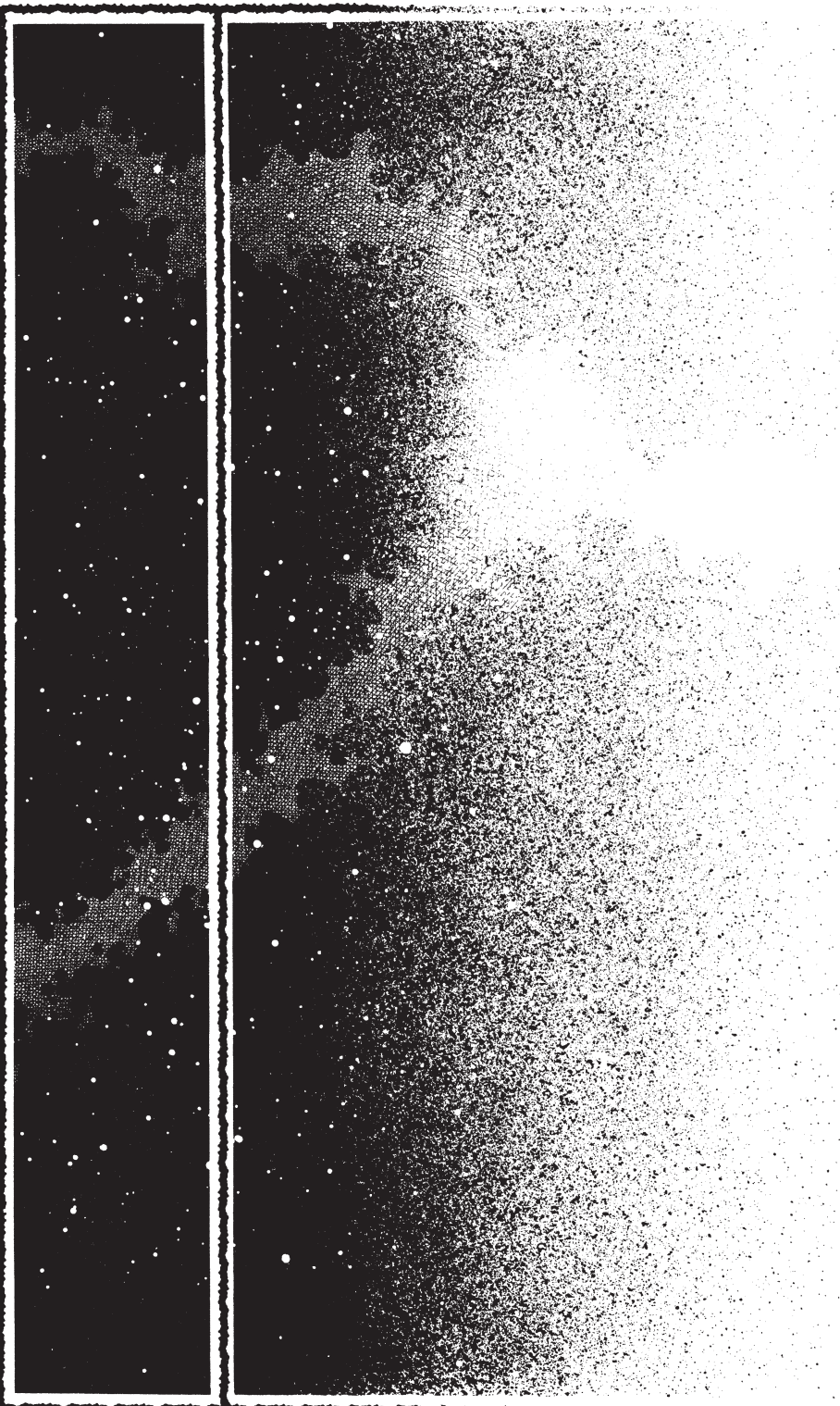


# One Dimensional Life *in the* Three Dimensional World

Why abstractions, norms, and absolutes are an assault on humanity and existence itself.



I took off my paint-splattered jacket and my shirt, and gazed at myself in the mirror of the airplane's restroom. What I saw was something I had only glimpsed before in the eyes of my most adoring lovers: the curves and textures of my skin, the scars and tattoos and lines cut into it painted a picture together, telling a life of wild adventures and undreamable extremes, a story more poignant and thrilling than any other I was beautiful—beauty itself was incarnated in me, as a vessel of a world of struggles and longing and triumphs bigger than anything that could fit in any book. It was a moment of blinding brilliance, but I rested comfortably into it, confident, as if I had known through all the squalor and desperation that I was simply being primed for this. And, for once I felt that I could live a hero's life as well as die a warrior's death.

*"A woman can never be too rich or too thin."*

The anorexic and the body builder are both pursuing ideals that recede before them. Once one starts to measure oneself against a one-dimensional standard, such as strength or slimness, too much is never enough: the goal is always ahead of you, no matter how far you go. These ideals cannot be reached in this world. . . but if you follow them far enough, they *can* lead you *out* of it, into the abyss which is their true domain—as Arnold Schwarzenegger's early heart problems, and the suicides of our rock stars and sex symbols, clearly attest.

It's true that Arnold Schwarzenegger, Hollywood actresses, and others like them were practically factory farmed by this competition-obsessed society; but the rest of us are infected with these values too—think of us as free range versions of the same livestock. All our judgments, all our conceptualizations of the world refer to absolutes and ideals: Sara is pretty, but not as pretty as Diana, who is not as pretty as the girl on the magazine cover; Jane is smart, but not as smart as the boy who was accepted to Harvard, who clearly is not as intelligent as Albert Einstein was; serving free food is revolutionary, but not as revolutionary as setting a police station on fire. We are truly one-dimensional thinkers: unable to see each individual quality or action for what it is alone, only able to apprehend it in terms of how it compares to others. . . the implication being that there is some fundamental scale against which *everything* can be compared. This is *one* way of conceiving of the world, yes, but *not* the only way, and not the best way in most circumstances, either.

This way of thinking makes everything into a competition, for those who don't want to accept their inferiority; it makes us disregard the value and unique significance of every event and entity, in favor of finding a place for them in the system of calibration. The truth is that every human being really does have a value unlike any other, every radical action and approach is important to "the revolution" in irreplaceable ways (the important question is *not* which means to apply, but how to make them complement

each other), and we desperately need ways to articulate this to ourselves. **We need a language with which we can celebrate through description, not comparison.** Without this, no matter how clearly we know we should value every little thing for its own sake, we are trapped by the assumptions of our own means of expression:

*"I love you,"* whispers the young girl.

*"Do you love me more than anyone else, more than anything?"* demands the boy.

*"I love you. . . differently, because of what you are. Not more, not less—there's no comparison with love, for love cherishes what is. Love is not judgment, it is measureless, matchless. . ."* she replies—but he has already turned away.

Where did this obsession with one-dimensional standards come from? It originated with language itself: where one word serves to represent many different individual experiences, abstraction is already present. When you say "sunlight," it seems as if you are designating a thing that exists in the world somewhere, when actually you are referring to a multitude of experiences, all different but with some very basic similarities. **What is most precious in experiences is not the lowest common denominators, but the once-in-a-lifetime particulars**—but words leave those out entirely. What use is a word that only applies to one moment of one individual's experience? That is not a currency that can retain value from one to another, and thus is useless for communication. Communication is a necessary part of being human; but it is crucial that each of us remembers that no word or concept could ever capture the infinite depth and complexity of a single instant of life.

The birth of Western civilization, which is founded upon one dimensional thinking, occurred in ancient Greece, when Plato took the abstraction of language one step farther. Plato declared that our abstractions referred to some "higher" world of ideals, in which "courage" and "honor" and "justice" exist in their pure form; in doing so, he turned everything backwards, placing our broad generalizations before the experiences they are drawn from, and claiming that it is those vague generalizations that have truth. Thus

he took the reference point of our concepts out of the world altogether, suggesting that our real experiences in it are unimportant, irrelevant. Paul, the founder of Christianity, extended this philosophy into the world of religion: the "ideal" existed in heaven, and the earth was the flawed, evil imitation of it.

Ideas and doctrines alone were not enough to bend human experience of the world to the system of absolutes, of course. Against the wisdom of bodily experience, in which the unique qualities of every entity and event are encountered up close, they were powerless. But slowly, it became possible to enforce the doctrine of the ideal upon the world of daily perception.

It began with the end of the barter system, and the beginning of subdivided time. Suddenly, everything had a certain, set value, and the day was divided into measured segments. Time and worth cannot really be measured—the man who has truly lived knows that the stopwatch cannot capture the way time speeds up when he is in bed with his boyfriend and slows down when he is "on the clock" at work, he knows that the best and worst things in life cannot be "deserved" or earned, let alone appraised—but the pay-by-the-hour jobs of the exchange economy forced people to measure them anyway, and the habit sunk in.

Soon, everything was measured and calibrated: women's clothing sizes, for example. Until the end of the nineteenth century, women's clothing was made by hand, for individual women. A woman was seen as possessing distinct personal qualities, not as a "size 6" or "plus size." It's very telling that over the last few decades, the perfect ideal of the woman has been described numerically—"36-24-36"—and anything that varies from that perfect Platonic form is less than beautiful. Women now occupy a scale of value according to their measured weight. Some struggle with scales every morning, hoping the number will be lower so their value will be greater.

It only remained for brand names to finish reducing the real complexity of the world to the empty simplicity of abstractions. Once upon a time, human beings had gardens; in those days, every fruit or vegetable was unique, and looked it. Now our food is scientifically

engineered to total uniformity, and comes with a brand name identifying which absolute it represents: the supermarket's generic brand is the Platonic form of the "inferior banana," the name-brand banana is the perfect incarnation of the banana as abstraction, and the archetypal banana of the rich, eco-elitist consumers comes marked "organic."

Those who would resist these attempts to bend the real world to the flatness of the conceptual world often fall into the same practices. The world of political theory is rife with abstraction and one dimensional thinking. Many make it through childhood with their ability to appreciate the irreplaceable details of life intact, only to fall to the maladies of generalizing and idealizing when they begin to read theory and attempt to form an "analysis" of life: their impressions and emotions are converted into an ideology, and where their struggles and goals once referred to real people they now see those people only as playing pieces in a war of symbols.

Ultimately, the pursuit of "ideals" which cannot exist in this world constitutes a rejection of this world, the *real* world, and thus of life itself—as demonstrated by the sad fate of the body builders and anorexics who take it to its logical extreme, the grave. We are so used to denigrating this world, saying it is a fucked up, imperfect place—and so it appears, compared with our "perfect" standards and ideals, which seem so perfect only because they cannot exist. A truly radical resolution would be to embrace existence just as it is, as the only thing that matters, to proclaim that this world itself is heaven, made for our total enjoyment and fulfillment. . . and then, to ask: *If that's the case, how do we act accordingly? What have we been doing wrong all this time?*

In doing so, we would finally have to accept and embrace ourselves exactly as we are, in all our diversity and variety, and free ourselves from the shadow of the false heaven of Plato and the advertising agents, where "real" beauty supposedly resides. Liberated entirely from standards, from the lingering ghost of Christian judgment and condemnation, we could see that *what we are* must itself constitute the measure and meaning of beauty, of dignity and magnificence, if such concepts are to exist at all.