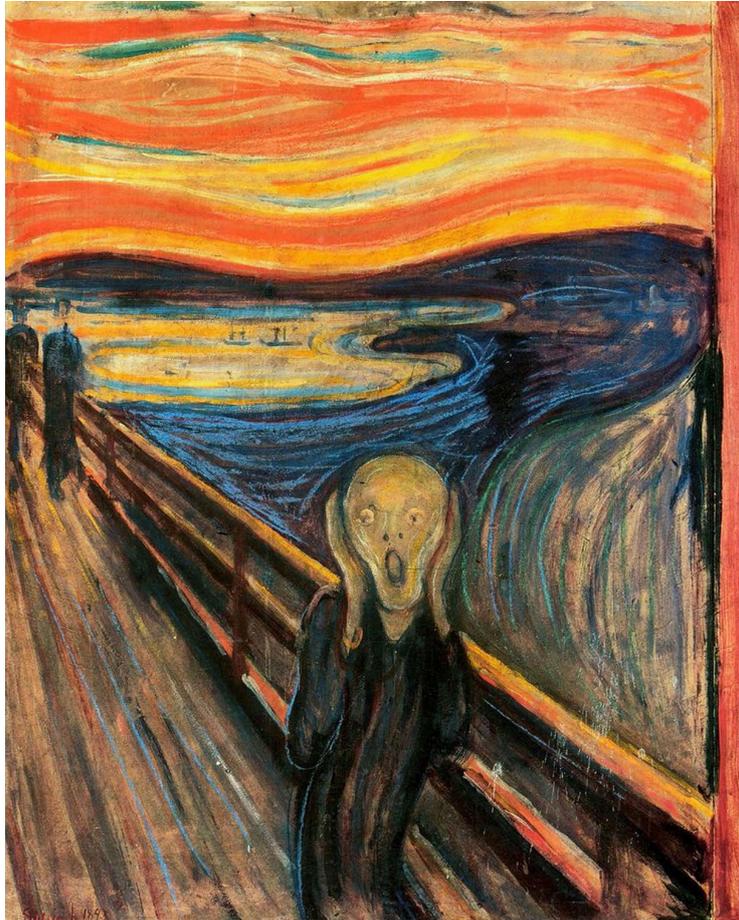


THE SCREAM

Edvard Munch(1893)



At the end of the day you die, they dig a hole, throw you in it, put dirt on your face and the worms eat you. Just be grateful that it's in that order.

The sky is on fire, a boiling cauldron of yellow, orange and red.

A figure stands on a bridge. The eyes are wide with shock and this androgynous figure is cupping both ears to block out a blood-curling scream that is ripping through nature.

This picture is **The Scream**, by the Norwegian artist Edvard Munch (1863-1944) and portrays human beings cut loose from the certainty that God exists, that human life is significant and that our deaths are not anonymous.

Without this certainty, which had comforted our ancestors for many centuries, human beings today are faced with the very real possibility that they are inhabiting a Universe that they don't understand which has no interest in understanding them and which will ultimately extinguish everybody and everything.

This picture has consequently become a universal symbol of our isolation and anxiety.

Munch is suggesting that we can only relate to such a Universe in screaming panic.

SHOULD WE ALL BE SCREAMING ?

Imagine that you are a student researching the possibility that there may be life on other distant planets and that after a careful consideration of the evidence you come to the conclusion that all of the available data strongly indicates that the earth is in fact the only planet on which there is any kind of life, that all other planets in every other galaxy are quite dead and that we as human beings are entirely alone as physical thinking beings in the Universe.

What sort of impact do you think this conclusion would have on you? It would presumably discourage activities like paying insurance premiums for possible 'alien abduction' or from romantic speculation that there are thinking beings out there, speculating about us down here, speculating about them out there.

However, would you be shocked and disgusted by your new judgement? Would the thought of our isolation amongst the billions of galaxies in the Universe plunge you into a state of despair and compel you to give up any belief you may have that life is valuable and worth living. It might do, of course, but I suspect that most of you would not be affected in this way. This new view of the Universe might very well encourage some sort of reflection on life and its possible meaning. However, few of you, I think, would feel obliged to jettison a positive view of life simply because it was now believed that human beings were alone in the Universe. That's because it would be difficult for anybody to see a

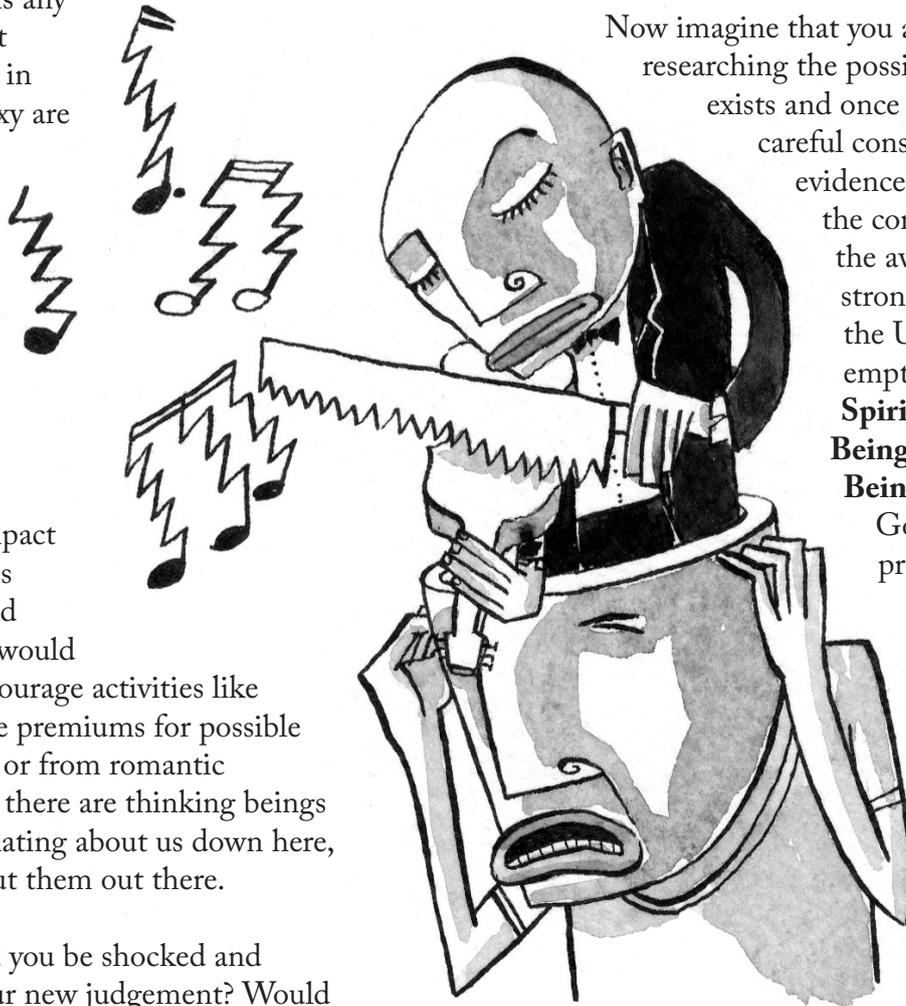
necessary connection between the absence of other physical thinking beings and the need to embrace a philosophy of despair. Your life, then, I imagine, would probably carry on in exactly the same way as it did before accepting that life was a unique happening on the planet earth.

Now imagine that you are a student researching the possibility that God exists and once again after a careful consideration of the evidence you come to the conclusion that all the available evidence strongly indicates that the Universe is also empty of any supreme **Spiritual Thinking Being** and that this **Being** which we call

God is simply a projection of our desire to believe in a Supreme Being out there caring for us down here, a sort of spiritual aspirin that anaesthetises us from the pain of our isolation. What sort of impact do you think this

conclusion would have on you? Would it leave you largely untouched and lead to only minimal changes like not attending a place of worship and not supporting God in an argument about His existence? Or would it be like a very heavy object dropping on you from a tall ladder and create earthquakes in your head?

In this first chapter we are going to look at thinkers who believe that the impact should be more like the bone-crushing and screaming experience of a heavy weight dropping on your



head and that discarding the idea that a spiritual Being called God exists is not like discarding the idea that other physical beings exist in the Universe. Instead, it is a conclusion that should create tremors in the very being of your soul.

FILM THE DARK KNIGHT (2008) (Life's a Scream)

The Joker, in Batman films, is a character who is *screaming* but who hides his despair with a painted fake smile. He understands that the death of God means the death of *meaning* and that we are simply the product of some blind cosmic process that coughed us up and which will eventually swallow us up.

He is consequently contemptuous of others who carry on living as if God's death has no consequences whatsoever, who carry on obeying God's rules and finding *meaning* in traditional values like jobs, marriage and family.

He wants others to see what he can see, that without God, life is but a spark in the blackness, that appears, flickers and dies forever and that values are consequently valueless and have no foundation whatsoever.

He also wants them to share his despair.

And so he creates chaos in other people's lives. He sets moral traps and makes them break their moral rules. He then watches with amusement as their lives fall to pieces and the world they inhabit burns down.

He is having the last laugh.

In the interrogation scene with Batman, the Joker expresses his contempt for these 'little people'.

You see their morals....,their codes is a bad joke..dropped at the first sign of trouble. They're only as good as the world allows them to be.

I'll show you, when the chips are down, these

civilised people, they'll eat each other. See, I'm not a monster, I'm just ahead of the curve.

You have all these rules and you think they'll save you.

The only sensible way to live in the world is without rules.

In this scene Batman batters the Joker mercilessly. However, he seems to be immune to physical pain.

This physical pain is nothing compared to the screaming internal pains of existence and so when he eventually falls to his death he simply laughs.



I happen to be crazy but I'm not stupid.

QUESTIONS

- (1) In the interrogation scene the paint on The Joker's face is cracking and his skin becomes visible. What is this suggesting?
- (2) The Joker hides his despair with make-up. Can you think of other ways people cover up despair and depression?
- (3) Batman is the only superhero who dresses in black and who is associated with an animal that operates in darkness. What does this suggest about people, who like Batman, live as if life has meaning and purpose.
- (4) In the interrogation passage the Joker maintains that moral codes are a bad joke. Explain why.

(5) Do you agree with the Joker's assessment of moral codes? Give reasons.

RESEARCH

Research the life of Edvard Munch and the background to the painting *The Scream* on page 1.

POETRY

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) (Screams Postponed)

In the poetic novel *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883) the 19th century and atheist writer Friedrich Nietzsche expresses existential despair through a madman who rushes into the market square and announces **The Death of God**.

Whither is God?' he cried, 'I shall tell you. We have killed him—you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how have we done this? How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What did we do when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there any up or down left? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night and more night coming on all the while? Must not lanterns be lit in the morning? Do we not hear anything yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? God is dead. And we have killed him. How shall we, the murderers of all murderers, comfort ourselves?

The crowd stared at the madman in silence and astonishment. At last he dashed his lantern to the ground. *"I have come too early,"* he said. *"This tremendous event is still on its way—it has not yet reached the ears of man."*

People, according to Nietzsche, did not yet truly understand the implications of what they had done in killing God. However, Nietzsche predicted that someday people would realize the consequences of their atheism, and this realization would lead to an age of nihilism—the destruction of all meaning and value in life.

QUESTIONS

(1) Nietzsche compares a disbelief in God with *unchaining the earth from the sun*. What is he suggesting by this comparison?

(2) What do you think is meant by the line *"I have come too early"*?

(3) James Thomson (1834-1882) a Scottish poet wrote *The City of the Dreadful Night* (1874). This City is a place in the mind where man searches for meaning and discovers that it doesn't exist. He sums up our situation with these lines

*The world rolls round for ever like a mill;/
It grinds out death and life and good and
ill;/It has no purpose, heart or mind or
will.*

He then points to The Sphinx who stares out into the vast abyss of air, finds nothing and responds with a face of *impassive endurance*.

James Thomson suggests that this Sphinx like endurance is the best response left to human beings in a life stripped of divine meaning and hope.

Do you agree with Thomson?