

The Fear of Insignificance

**Searching for Meaning in
the Twenty-First Century**

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Introduction

Our Historical Moment

We are awakening from a period that Immanuel Kant would have called one of dogmatic slumber.¹ But as opposed to the dogmatic slumbers of previous centuries governed by metaphysical and religious beliefs that Kant dismantled in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), the last decades will probably go into history as the age of mindless fantasies of omnipotence and of thoughtless free market dogmatism.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 the proponents of unfettered free markets, who had taken the reigns of the economy during the years of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, went into a triumphalist mood: the demise of communism and the dissolution of the Soviet Union and its sphere of influence were taken to be proof that the gospel of the free market was now the only world religion of universal validity.²

The value of everything ranging from companies to religions and from music records to ideas was determined through ranking and rating systems: stock markets, rating agencies, bestseller lists, or number of hits on the Web. It was a matter of logic to extend this commoditization to human beings,³ and this commoditization was accelerated by the new global infotainment system. One of this system's main activities was to rank people for its own purposes: it needed global celebrities for global marketing and advertising. As a result it pumped two models of the good life around the globe: celebrity—a quantification of how well you are known—and financial success.

The new ranking systems determined the value of the individual by a number of factors ranging from the number of friends on Facebook, through the number of entries on Google, and to the position of the ever-growing number of listings of the most influential, most popular, sexiest, most powerful or wealthiest people in cities, countries and, ultimately, the globe.

A new species was born: *Homo globalis*, the large class of people whose identity is strongly defined by their being plugged into the global

infotainment. Now that Homo globalis was commoditized, it was no longer just the holder of a portfolio but became the portfolio itself, traded around the globe through the infotainment system.

The commoditization of the self induced permanent instability of self-esteem and the sense of leading a significant life. The result was constant existential unease ineffectively addressed by a combination of psychotropic medication and quick-fix spiritual advice by self-help gurus who spread the gospel that celebrity and wealth were just a matter of willpower and courage.

The current meltdown of the financial markets has awoken us from the neoliberal belief that capitalism captures the essence of what it means to live a rich human life. The demise of this dogma was finalized with the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers, which showed even to the most recalcitrant that a historical period had come to its end.⁴

The victim of the age of the golden calf, the decades governed by the commoditization of everything, has not just been the economy, even though the havoc inflicted on the lives and livelihood of scores of millions is terrible. The real casualty is the idea of the free world and the free society, which has been perverted into the mindless dogma that what really matters must be measurable in economic terms. Great harm was done to the core idea of the open society that thrives on critical, trenchant thought, the enduring legacy of the European Enlightenment.⁵

How can Homo globalis's malaise be addressed? The claim of this book is that the ideas needed to reconstruct the core values of what John Stuart Mill defended in *On Liberty*⁶ are to be found in the cultural and intellectual history of the West.⁷

The first idea is that the drama of human development rather than the resulting commodity is the core of human life. The infotainment system has made us forget that the true drama of human life is the process through which we become individuals with character, voice, and a worldview. The point is to live lives that are our own creation rather than adapting to the demands of the global marketplace.

Existentialism developed this idea by showing that we live with the tension between our cultural heritage and the ability to criticize it; between our desires and our possibilities; and the need to turn the base materials of our lives, which we did not choose, into a life that is truly ours. In these respects we are like bricoleurs, artists who make do with what they find in their backyards and do not buy their materials in stores that could cater to their whims. Our individuality is the result of our struggle to integrate these tensions and to live them fruitfully rather than trying to resolve them into an illusory harmony.

The second idea was originally formulated in classical Greece. The idea that we can liberate our minds and reach for ever more truth has been the cornerstone of the philosophical tradition. Plato's great parable of the cave, his image of humans as creatures led by circumstance of birth, and to mistake illusion for reality is a great allegory of the process that philosophies of all cultures have called upon us to undergo: to examine the most fundamental tenets of our worldviews mercilessly.⁸

This idea received its latest formulation in the European Enlightenment defined by Kant as "the liberation of man from self-imposed tutelage." To be truly free, humans need to address the most basic issues of existence through an arduous process of intellectual effort. These questions range from the nature of the good life and the good society to the question of how we can move from erroneous belief to true knowledge. Without coherent worldviews our lives lack the structure that provides us with meaning; and without criteria of cogency, we have no way of anchoring those worldviews beyond how well ideas sell in the marketplace, a notoriously fickle yardstick for quality. While I have no illusion that consensus can be achieved on the deepest questions of existence, I hope to show that we can at least argue these issues articulately.

This book proposes a reassessment of what it means to live a valuable life. A rapprochement is to be expected between European cultural sensibilities, characterized by a love of cultural and intellectual depth, and the tremendous intellectual energies of the Americans who have been relegated to the sidelines of mainstream culture during the last decades.

Hopefully this may contribute to the development of world citizenship⁹ in the deep sense. As opposed to glib forms of cosmopolitanism,¹⁰ it is not just facile worldliness, but the realization that globalization has come to the point where there is no way around cooperation across divides of religion and ideology—a task only possible if we are able and willing to see our worldviews as human creations.

Reconnecting to the central ideas of our culture requires arduous work, and this book outlines aspects of the mental discipline¹¹ required for living in a Free World as a world citizen. And it also opens the vista of leading lives infinitely richer aside from those that were prescribed during the age of the golden calf.

This book attempts to provide a diagnosis for the malaise of Homo globalis and then argues for two distinct but connected ways to address it. Here is a brief outline of the book's structure and argument.

Part I focuses on diagnosing the plight of Homo globalis.

Chapter 1 gives an outline of the cultural and existential changes that have been induced by the global infotainment system and sketches the book's theoretical perspective. It will show the depth of our need to feel that we are significant and how this need is rooted in our biological nature, particularly as it has been understood by existential philosophy, psychology, and its new offspring: experimental existential psychology.

Chapter 2 focuses on two features of the global culture driven by the infotainment system: it takes Nike's phenomenally successful "just do it" campaign, which celebrated its twentieth anniversary in 2008, and shows how it captures an essential aspect of the spirit of the age: anything is possible and two things are desirable—fame and riches both of which are measurable and constantly rated and ranked throughout the world. The chapter argues that the seeming objectivity of these rankings leads members of *Homo globalis* to feel that their place on these scales determines their value—to the detriment of the 99.999 percent of us who do not figure in these rankings. Those who do figure in them live in constant fear of losing their visibility in the list of the richest, sexiest, and most coveted celebrities—and thus the persistent fear of insignificance arises.

Chapter 3 analyzes some of the resources through which members of *Homo globalis* try to assuage their persistent fears of insignificance: the booming self-help culture and pop spirituality. The chapter's central argument is that many of the products of these two phenomena are based on shaky intellectual foundations (to put it mildly) and argues that incoherent worldviews are unlikely to provide us with meaning of enduring value. It describes the relativist atmosphere that has made our culture overly tolerant for intellectual constructs devoid of coherence.

From here the book branches out in two directions: Part II provides an existentialist alternative to the conception of the self that has been promoted in the "just do it" culture described in **Chapter 2**. Part III calls for reestablishing a culture of reasoned argument as an antidote to the mindless relativism and anti-intellectualism described in **Chapter 3**. It can be read independently of Part II for those primarily interested in the idea of how a culture based on reason might look.

Part II develops an existentialist picture of individuality quite different from that of the "just do it" culture: it argues that the central task of individuals is to shape the base materials of our lives into a coherent creation that is our life. In doing so it attacks the idea that the individual's essence is prescribed by ethnic, religious, racial, or gender, as has been argued by the fashionable politics of identity. Instead, it calls for a reflective individualism; each of us must decide what the central themes of our lives will be and not accept that being Jewish, Muslim, gay, a woman, or black is what must determine all of our lives.

Chapter 4 shows that all of us are born into a family, culture, and language that we did not choose. For many of us this generates the task of choosing what of our background and upbringing we accept, what we reject, and how we turn our lives into our creation. This task is often arduous and conflictual. The chapter's central thesis is that a life well lived is not one in which these tensions are resolved but in which they are lived fully and productively, as shown through the lives of Barack Obama, Somali-born activist and writer Ayaan Ali Hirsi, and Jewish novelist Philip Roth.

Chapter 5 argues that the "just do it" culture has made it impossible to shape our lives according to their inner logic because it has claimed that anything is possible and that we can take on anything we like. This is patently false, and one of the tasks all of us need to tackle is to understand our strengths and weaknesses. As opposed to the Adidas Slogan *Impossible is Nothing*, all of us have limitations. The chapter's argument is that realizing the existence of limitations is not a process of resignation. Instead it proposes the notion of *active self-acceptance* through which we reach a positive conception of our individuality with its potentials and limits.

Chapter 6 tackles the question, "If not everything is possible, how do I determine what my life is about? How do I know what really matters to me?" This process has been made almost impossible by a culture that values youth more than anything else. We are supposed to be successful very early, and hence the process of acquiring self-knowledge is made almost impossible. To counteract this myth that youth is when we make all the central decisions of our lives, the chapter shows through some examples how humans often reach true self-knowledge rather late, and how many lives become more fulfilled only when through reflection we come to a reasoned conclusion what we want to focus on.

Part III launches a full-blown attack on the relativism and anti-intellectualism about worldviews that has been fashionable in the last decades. It argues for a return to exacting standards of argumentation and calls on members of Homo globalis to invest time and energy in the intellectual foundations of their worldviews. Its goal is to develop a psychology of world citizenship, of the mental and emotional abilities needed to live responsibly in an interconnected world. If we, as members of Homo globalis, do not try to influence our fate, humanity is about to self-destruct. Involving ourselves in the world's affair and investing time and energy in understanding them is a much better basis for living a significant life than buying into pop spirituality.

Chapter 7 shows the great downside of political correctness, the idea that beliefs need to be respected just because somebody holds them, no matter how irrational, odious, or incoherent they are. This tolerance has led to the point where all three Abrahamic religions have developed fundamentalist

strands that have influenced world affairs in catastrophic ways. The chapter's argument is that Plato's idea that we are not condemned to the beliefs that have been instilled in us in childhood; that we can rise above these beliefs and use reason to build our worldview still has validity. This chapter is a plea for the ideal of liberal education, the part of our studies geared toward making money, to make us more competent citizens of the world.

Chapter 8 tackles one of the deepest reasons why Homo globalis tends to shy away from debating issues of worldview: arguments about religion tend to get nowhere, so why bother? The result has been the idea of political correctness: we need to respect each other's beliefs. But this, I argue, is a psychological impossibility: how can we respect beliefs that we take to be shallow, irrational, or immoral? We may, at best, be able to tolerate them. Hence I suggest an alternative to the ideology of political correctness, which I call *civilized disdain*. By this I mean the position that respects the humanity of all but allows for the disdain that we feel toward beliefs that we take to be unacceptable.

Chapter 9 finally asks the question where we are headed. Existential psychology has shown that humans are very unlikely to give up their beliefs no matter how destructive or irrational they are. Are we therefore doomed to destroy the planet through warfare, nuclear terror, and ecological ruin? The chapter presents the nonzero principle active in biological and cultural evolution: non-zero-sum situations are more likely to be adaptive than zero-sum situations. This is what has created ever more complex organisms and cultures. But what will win—our irrationality or nonzeroness? We cannot know, and yet the chapter calls on Homo globalis to bet on the nonzero principle, to form a coalition of all those who want to be citizens of the world, and to take responsibility for the planet and humanity as a whole.

The Years of the Golden Calf

September 11, or 9/11, will probably come to be seen as the onset of the twenty-first century. This will create problems for future historians because a strong case has been made when the twentieth century ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. What, then, will the years between 1989 and 2001 be classified? My suggestion is that they might go into history as a brief period in which the West believed that its values and culture had triumphed. Francis Fukuyama's thesis that history had come to an end can well be understood as the idea that the West's takeover of the world was on the way to completion.¹

More than anything 9/11 is an indication for the depth of the human need for meaning and identity. Looking at al Qaeda and the perpetrators of 9/11 from a purely psychological point of view shows how wrong the idea has been that capitalism and democracy are enough to sustain human being existentially. Mohammed Atta and his fellow members were neither poor nor uneducated. In fact they had gotten to know each other while studying for degrees at Western universities. Their motivation for killing themselves along with thousands of innocent victims was their seething rage at what they experienced as the humiliation of Islam at the hands of high-handed American policies.

The West had welcomed them to acquire knowledge and technological expertise through its institutions of learning. But their encounter with the West created the opposite of what many would have expected. They felt nothing but disdain and hatred at the liberty and, as they saw it, mindless, soulless materialism, and hedonism of the Western world. When they encountered Osama bin Laden's call to purify Islam of the putrefying influence of the West, they finally found meaning and a calling: they would show the world that Western dominance and superiority was but a sham, and that Islam would ultimately triumph.

It is easy to disqualify suicide terrorism as a fringe phenomenon and an indication of extreme psychopathology. Research² shows otherwise:

in-depth interviews with intercepted suicide bombers by psychologically trained researchers did not find any psychopathology that would allow predicting who will turn into a suicide bomber. If anything, suicide bombing, though extreme, is a manifestation of the depth of the human need for meaning. More than anything, we humans need to feel that we live lives that matter.

The roots of this desire are to be found far back in our evolutionary history. The human species at some point in its evolution made a momentous transition, possibly the most dramatic step in the evolution from being merely a more intelligent animal to being distinctly human: our species acquired the notion of death and the realization that each of us will die.³

There are powerful arguments for the thesis that this is the step that made our species fully human. Philosophers of all cultures and ages have claimed that the ability to live well with the knowledge of death is crucial to living a good life. And, as opposed to many other philosophical theses that survive only as parts of intellectual and cultural history, the idea that death awareness is one of the defining characteristics of our life that has received powerful empirical validation.

Existential philosophy had claimed that coming to terms with finitude is at the center of human existence throughout the twentieth century, particularly in Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1927) and Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (1943).⁴ Heidegger and Sartre analyzed the most basic structures of human existence. Heidegger put the point in his unique style when he said that *Dasein* (literally "being-there," Heidegger's term for human existence) *stands out into nothingness*. By this Heidegger denoted two related aspects of *Dasein*: First, humans, whether consciously or not, constantly make choices, and each choice we make prevents other courses of action or life options from being actualized. Second, human existence is characterized by the awareness that it is *finite*. We know that our time is limited, and that we will die. This immensely heightens the impact of the terminal nature of our choices. Not only did we not actualize some possibilities by choosing to act as we did, but also the finite amount of time we have to live means that we did not have the option of rewinding our lives, so to speak, and try other options as well.

It was one of Heidegger's seminal insights that awareness of finitude and freedom inevitably generates existential anxiety, which is so difficult to bear that we most of the time fend off this awareness. In Heidegger's terms, most of the time, we live in a state of inauthenticity. Instead of being aware of freedom and finitude, we live as if there are no choices, as custom, social norms, expectations and the worldview determine completely how we live. This inauthenticity is a defense that allows us to live our lives without being flooded by anxiety.⁵

Existentialism ceased to be en vogue during the last decades. Its emphasis on the tragic dimension of human life did not square well with the mindless optimism of a culture that thrived on the idea that anxiety was for the weak-minded and should be taken care of pharmacologically. Hence, along with other great paradigms of psychodynamic thought, existentialism had been relegated to the archives of intellectual history, which in turn was studied by fewer and fewer students who were mostly busy getting degrees that would help them to launch lucrative careers as quickly as possible.

While general culture was busy with economic escapism, existential philosophy gradually regained a life of its own—which first occurred on the sidelines of academia. Irvin Yalom⁶ showed that existentialism provided a valuable framework for clinical practice. The ideas of anthropologist Ernest Becker, particularly his last two books—*The Denial of Death* (1974) and the posthumously published *Escape from Evil* (1975)—reformulated some of the core ideas of existentialism in a way closer to evolutionary biology. He argues that evolution has created an impossible situation for the human species. Like all other animals, we are terrified of anything that could lead to our death. But unlike other animal species, we as humans *know of our death*.

Yet we simply cannot bear this knowledge. Becker's momentous hypothesis is that *the denial of death is one of the strongest motivators of the human species*. But how can we deny something that we know? The primary answer is that in order not to feel exposed to the naked terror of death, humans buy into worldviews that have two functions: First, they provide us with meaning. They tell us what we are here for, how to structure our lives. Second, this worldview protects us by giving us the experience of being part of a larger whole. Belonging to a uniquely valuable group (religion, nation, or race) as defined by the worldview, makes us *eon ipso* valuable and thus bolsters our self-esteem.

In the late 1980s a new research paradigm of social psychology and the theory of motivation and personality based on Becker's ideas emerged: experimental existential psychology (EEP).⁷ EEP is quite extraordinary in that it has turned a philosophical theory into a testable empirical theory with quite spectacular success, and we will encounter some of its specific results in the course of this book.

The central tenet of existential psychology is that only an animal that knows time is limited can ask, "Do I live a life worth living?" Only such an animal is preoccupied with the question whether life as a whole is good, valiant, and successful.⁸ And this question camouflages the unbearable terror, which is awareness of the passage of time and of death. Terror management theory,⁹ one of the most successful paradigms of experimental existential psychology, has established beyond any doubt that we humans

invest enormous energies to deny death, and that the denial of death is one of the most powerful motivators of the human psyche: we cannot really accept that we will die.

The Psychological Function of Self-Esteem and Worldviews

Worldviews provide us with what Ernest Becker has called symbolic immortality. Each worldview states that the group and its mission on earth are there to stay beyond our individual death. By contributing to the larger group, its task on earth and its continuity, we feel that something of us will survive our physical death. It also lowers the looming threat of the feeling of being an insignificant speck in a universe that is indifferent to us.

The denial of death is responsible for humankind's greatest achievements and for some of its most abominable traits. Behavior as diverse as the building of cathedrals, writing literature, and creating art, but also the initiation of wars and suicide bombings are all linked to our need to defend ourselves against mortality.¹⁰ If 9/11 proves anything, it is that human beings are willing to lose their lives and kill thousands of innocent people for only one reason: to preserve the worldview that provides them with meaning.

Existential psychology shows that there are basically three ways in which we defend against the terror induced by death awareness: one is attachment to significant figures, spouses, family, and close friends;¹¹ the second is to bolster self-esteem; and the third is to cling to cultural worldviews that imbue our lives with meaning.¹²

These three elements are interlinked developmentally. As infants and toddlers, we are completely dependent on adults to take care of us. Their expression of love and support provides us with the sense that we are safe against the dangers of the world. As we grow up and our social awareness widens, our primary caretakers (normally parents) cease to be our only frame of reference. The positive feedback we receive from an ever-widening circle becomes crucial for our self-esteem, which bolsters our sense of security.¹³

The diameter of the relevant circle increases as we grow up. Our kindergarten teacher and our little peer group broadens to a school class, a whole school, possibly a youth organization, to our peers and teachers at college, and so on.

Once we belong more or less safely, a second issue arises: self-esteem has an essential comparative element. Every group of animals is organized in hierarchies. We are genetically programmed to move up in this hierarchy as high as possible. For both sexes this means access to resources; for males

it means more access to females that will carry their offspring; for females it means protection by a stronger male and genes that are likely to increase the fitness of offspring.¹⁴

All mammals are also known to have a safety valve that prevents the fight for supremacy (which is mostly physical for nonhumans) from being lethal. When a male loses in the fight for the position of alpha male, there is a sharp drop in testosterone (the male sexual hormone associated, among others, with self-esteem and aggression) and serotonin (the neurotransmitter known to be instrumental in determining our mood).

This is manifested in body language that expresses dejection and the knowledge that we need to give up. This mechanism, which is equivalent to a mild and transient depression, is of great importance. It makes the animal relinquish the fight, acquiesce in its position, and thus prevents the physical harm or even death that is likely to result from continued challenge.

Of course we know all of this from our lives. If you tune into a tennis match on television, you very quickly know which of the players is now playing better even if you don't see the result. If one of them is on a good streak, his gait between points is bouncy, his gaze aggressive, and his posture upright. The other player often looks frustrated, nervous, insecure, dejected, and beaten at worst.

We humans have inherited from our animal ancestors their natural disposition to strive for dominance and defeat their opponents.¹⁵ Players who have won a game show a sharp increase in testosterone and a moderate increase in serotonin, while those who have lost show a corresponding decrease. The same holds true for the physiology of two people who have competed for a promotion.

In advanced civilizations self-esteem is mostly no longer a function of beating somebody in direct competition. It is rather that we measure our achievement vis-à-vis a whole culture. The question now arises: What is your field of comparison? What are the criteria according to which you assess your value? What is the group within which you strive for status? To whom do you compare yourself?

The Emergence of Homo Globalis

The frame of reference for comparison changed radically in the last decades. The process of *globalization* that went into high gear in the 1980s with the deregulation of the financial markets became a tangible reality for anybody with an investment portfolio on October 19, 1987, the day that has gone into history as Black Monday. A severe fall of the Hong Kong Stock Exchange rapidly moved through the time zones, raced through

Europe, and hit Wall Street where the Dow Jones lost 22.6 percent within a single day.

Many felt the impact of globalization in ways they did not necessarily understand. In its first stages, global connectedness was clear for those who made strategic decisions, like moving manufacturing jobs to countries with cheaper labor, whereas workers who lost these jobs did not quite understand how this came about. This also happened to lawyers or accountants who had conducted their practices for decades without worrying about the new global trend and were suddenly faced with the emergence of global law firms and accounting giants like Ernst & Young, Andersen, and KPMG with whom they couldn't compete.

But soon global consciousness became a reality for anyone with cable television. Operation Desert Storm, the first invasion of Iraq in 1991, with its embedded reporters, allowed viewers around the globe to share the experience of the troops that moved into Kuwait and Iraq in real time. It also made clear to everybody that what happens at a point on the globe that many couldn't even find on the map had powerful implications everywhere. September 11 brought this to new heights. Within minutes after CNN broke the news of the first jet crashing into the South Tower, the world was glued to television screens, thus creating the first terrorist act to be transmitted globally and to instantly change the way people from New York to Canberra and from Karachi to Buenos Aires experienced the world.

Culturally the power of global interconnectedness hit upon the young generation through the emergence of MTV, which started broadcasting in 1981 and soon turned into a global phenomenon. New art forms like the music video spread around the world within a few years and created a lingua franca for youngsters around the world.

The emergence of the Internet¹⁶ truly changed ordinary people's daily experience dramatically. In the past it would take many years of hard work to introduce concepts, ideas, and brands that had global recognition value. Now images, ideas, and information travelled the globe at the speed of light. The Internet enabled brands and concepts like Google and YouTube within months to span the globe and change people's lives ranging from the way they did research to how they conducted their social lives. MySpace allowed people to peek into the most private aspects of lives that were on the other side of the earth. YouTube made it possible for Muslim preachers in Egypt to reach believers in Oregon; Amazon made it possible to order Stephen King's latest novel on the day it was published, no matter where you resided.

Homo globalis is a reality. In his seminal work *The End of History and the Last man*, Francis Fukuyama¹⁷ argued in 1992 that liberal democracy

and free market capitalism were the political and economic arrangement that would take hold of the whole world. With some regret he had also predicted that Homo globalis would sign up for bourgeois values; no large philosophical questions would be asked anymore, and the Last Man (a term Fukuyama borrowed from Nietzsche) would settle into questions no deeper than what car to buy and how to get good insurance for it.

But reality turned out to be very different. Tom Friedman¹⁸ tellingly entitled his analysis of globalization *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*. “Lexus” was an example of the brands that commanded instant recognition anywhere on earth. The olive tree was used by Friedman as a symbol for national, religious and ethnic identities. These had not disappeared or merged into global identities, but, as Friedman was keen to point out, often hardened and reached for ways to become more deeply rooted under the threat of the leveling influence of global capitalism and Western (or, more precisely, American) culture that was pumped around the world through the global infotainment system. Globalization in fact led to an ever growing clash between what political scientist Benjamin Barber¹⁹ called “Jihad vs. McWorld.” Along with thinkers like historian of religion Karen Armstrong,²⁰ Barber argued that many forms of fundamentalism were distinctly modern phenomena driven by globalization. They made a strong case the modern fundamentalism was a completely new movement that could only be understood within the context of the impact of global capitalism. Political philosopher John Gray²¹ made a strong case that al Qaeda could only be understood within the context of hypermodernity.

Symbolic Immortality and the Global Playing Field

For Homo globalis, maintaining meaning and identity became ever more complex. No culture was now immune from the influx and influence of foreign cultures, ways of life, religions and technological achievements. It became ever more difficult to feel that your belief system had exclusive validity, and that the group that defined your identity was uniquely valuable.

An Egyptian Pharaoh presumably knew about adjacent cultures, and the Classical Greek’s awareness of other cultures is historically documented. Ancient Greeks called non-Greeks *hoi barbaroi*, those barbarians (literally: those without a real language); to them it was clear that the only frame of reference relevant for their self esteem was Greece. You knew pretty well what you had to do to be respected and who you wanted to be remembered by after your death.

A Dutch merchant of the seventeenth century knew quite a bit about the world, because his wealth depended on importing goods from around the Globe to Europe. But there wasn't the slightest doubt that culturally Christendom was the only frame of reference that really mattered. The Netherlands of the seventeenth century was unique at the time because it was characterized by a belief in tolerance and a remarkable ability to accept religious diversity. Nevertheless a Dutch merchant's daily dealings were limited to those that he could communicate with directly, and this is what primarily defined his self-esteem.

As opposed to the Dutch merchant a few centuries ago, we have immediate access to audio-visual information about every corner of the globe. This is the essentially new element in the existential situation of the inhabitant of the global village. The question is, How do you define your place in a global playing field? How can you feel that your worldview is intrinsically meaningful if there are so many alternatives?

The global playing field now proposed a simple answer to the question of how cultures and worldviews could be valued. They needed to be ranked according to a quantitative measure. Mathematics is, after all, the most of objective of sciences. Advanced economies became governed by an ever growing, blind belief in the power of quantification. The value of *everything* had to be expressible in some number. This seemed obvious in the domain of economics, which was ostensibly about quantity to begin with. The nation or culture you belonged to could be ranked by its per capita gross domestic product—that is, by how fast its economy grew. The city you lived in could be ranked by how many global companies had their headquarters there.

Companies were ranked all the time, and the measures multiplied to make the ranking game more interesting. It was no longer just whether you were the largest company; you could also be the fastest-growing, the most profitable company; the company rated most inventive by some rating agency; the company rated most fun to work at.

Never mind that Nobel Laureate Daniel Kahneman and his deceased coresearcher Amos Twersky had argued for years that all of these models were based on wrong assumptions on how the human mind worked; or that George Soros, who had proven that he could play the markets like a grand piano said that the market's functioning was inherently flawed and irrational; or that future Nobel Laureate Paul Krugman kept saying that the American economy was not generating any real value and that the numbers were lying.²² But the numbers *couldn't* be lying. Quantification was the gospel of the golden calf, and doubting it was nothing but a quaint remainder of those who had not yet grasped the new religion.

The Great Delusion

We are awaking from more than two decades of what history will probably come to judge as a strange, worldwide delusion of omnipotence. Historians will find many reasons for what Alan Greenspan, one of the architects of the global economic meltdown at a certain moment called “irrational exuberance.” For more than two decades we were all swept into two illusions.

The first was that there were no real problems left for humanity to solve. We had it all figured out: free markets, representative democracy and human rights were the three ideas that had conquered the world.²³ With the fall of the Berlin Wall, the last great obstacle to world peace and prosperity had been removed. We lived at the end of history, after the end of ideology. Whatever was left to solve was basically a matter of good management. The world just needed to be turned over to economists to fix. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, in unison with the U.S. Federal Reserve, headed through most of this period by the Guru of endless economic growth through deregulation, Alan Greenspan, would fix states that had not yet quite aligned with the holy rules of the Free Market.

There was really no more use asking deep questions about the nature of the good life and the good society. Philosophical questions were for the sickly minded, left behind in the race for riches and celebrity. The point was to get ahead in life; existential questions could, after all, be answered by picking one of the world-religions off the shelf. If none quite fitted, there was an endless supply of new fusion-spiritualities that could be adapted to your specific needs and desires

The second illusion was that in a world of endless economic growth, the world was up for grabs, open 24/7 for those who had the guts and the imagination to reach for the stars. You could be anything you wanted. You could shape yourself and your life as you wished, and along the way become immensely rich. The good life depended on whether you went ahead to “just do it.”

The examples of those who had just done it were plentiful. Michael Jordan had taught the world to fly; Michael Jackson had shown that you could build your fantasyland through sheer talent; Bill Gates had shown that you could become the world’s richest man in no time. The Wachowski brothers showed that you could turn your childhood infatuation with Japanese Comics and Kung Fu movies into a spectacular trilogy that would gross billions.

The deification of endless economic growth and the myth of “just do it” together were the foundation of the age of the golden calf. Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan had preached its gospel: greed was good. We were all responsible for ourselves, and we shouldn’t expect anything

from the state or society. Nevertheless unfettered capitalism would, ultimately, benefit all. Reagan's theory of trickledown economics stated that the riches amassed at the top of the pyramid would end up making money for everybody.

For an ever growing number of people in the developed world, this actually seemed to work. Richard Florida²⁴ christened this group the *creative class*, the professionals ranging from journalists, designers and academics to doctors, lawyers, engineers and senior executives who were in high demand, could pick from what seemed an endless supply of exciting jobs and speed up their careers through diagonal moves across companies, universities, hospitals and an ever growing number of new media.

True: there were some worrying indicators; the income gap between the wealthy and the poor grew at a staggering pace. There were some party poopers who claimed that something was wrong with a financial system that allowed a single speculator to topple a currency. Some found the idea unpalatable that global companies could force ever new tax breaks onto governments by the simple threat of moving their management and operations elsewhere, particularly if these companies paid their CEOs five hundred times the average salary of its employees. Others again claimed that the new financial instruments that were flooding the market were too opaque to be assessed realistically. But nobody wanted to listen. The golden calf was too attractive to be questioned. Hence critics were dutifully discarded as Cassandras, and, if necessary, fired from their jobs to stop disturbing the party.²⁵

The gospel of quantification pushed its way into domains that had previously been untouched by it. High culture had, for a long time, resisted the pressure of quantification. The value of paintings, compositions, books and ideas had not been measured by how many people had watched, listened, read or believed them. There was supposed to be something like an intrinsic value to the creations of high culture. Universities, the supposed sanctuary of high culture were, as yet, supposed to be beyond quantification, too.

These bulwarks of high culture were crumbling quickly from the 1980s onwards. The iconic event was probably the series of concerts in the 1990s that came to be known as 'The Three Tenors' that united opera stars Placido Domingo, Luciano Pavarotti and Jose Carreras in a single show that became a great financial success. While some argued that this project acquainted many who would never have listened to it otherwise with opera, others saw this as an indication that classical music was gradually being killed by being chopped into user-friendly sound-bites in which the three tenors screamed high Cs in unison. In parallel, an ever growing number of

symphony orchestras needed to close down because of financial difficulties, as attendance of classical concerts dropped dramatically.

The value of a record was quite simple: it depended on how many were sold; the same went for books. Paintings were different: there could be only one of them—so the value was a matter of the price it fetched at Sotheby's or Christie's. Some of the buyers of Van Goghs, Cezannes, or Picassos may have known little about the painting's place in the development of the painter or an artistic school. But they had an irrefutable proof for the value of what they now owned: the money it had fetched at an auction that had been conducted globally.

Even religions, which sprouted at the pace of three new religions a day (yes, religion was a growth business), could now be measured quantitatively. The Catholic Church was worried by declining market share in the Western world, whereas Islam could proudly announce that it was on the way to overtake Christianity as the world's largest religion. Then again some of the new churches, which were run as sophisticated marketing operations could claim that they were fastest growing (some of them acquired constituencies measuring millions and funds measuring billions a few years after inception).

So why care about whether a belief system made any sense, whether it was a patchwork put together from incompatible historical sources like Indian Astrology and Kabbalah? Why should you subject it to critical examination? Why should you care whether it stood up to critical examination? Why should you check whether the latest spiritual guru your company had brought in for a little feel-good effect made any sense or whether he just put together some platitudes dressed up with Eastern sounding terms? If the guru had been hired by other Fortune 500 companies and commanded high fees, he must be good; if a book like *The Secret* sold millions of copies, here was a good reason to buy it.

The same held true for political belief systems. The two G.W. Bush administrations pushed the concept that ideas are measured only by how well they can be marketed to its ultimate conclusion. Truth and coherence ceased to be of any importance. If there was no case for either the connection between Saddam Hussein's regime and al Qaeda or its having piles of weapons of mass destruction, the case was simply made up.²⁶ With the efficient help of Karl Rove, Bush managed to get himself reelected, because his constituency no longer cared about the truth value of his ideas. The Age of the Golden Calf had come to its pinnacle: Ideas and belief systems had become commodities whose value was determined by supply and demand, like any other.

The Global I-Commodity Market

It was only a matter of logic to extend this model of quantitative ranking to human beings. By the inner logic of the game of quantifying value, money was the simplest measure, because it could be counted easily. Of course riches had played an important role in human affairs before. But now wealth was no longer just a measure of what you could afford, how safe you were and how much power you had. It became an indication of your value as a human being. The locution ‘he’s worth X dollars’ became more than a shortcut; it became a literal truth.

The next step was to find other ways of ranking humans. The spread of global capitalism and the craze for quantification and rankings created what I will call the *global I-Commodity Market*, and the result is the I-Commodity. Like every commodity its value depends on myriads of factors ranging from the rise or fall of supply and demand, the marketing success of competitors and so on. The measures and ranking multiply: while writing these pages I looked up the various *Forbes* lists, the *Times 100* list and *People Magazine*. I double-checked some facts about Google founders Larry Page and Sergei Brin, Steve Jobs, Oprah Winfrey, Tiger Woods and Philip Roth. I didn’t have to move from my chair to do so, and the info was not only textual; I could watch any amount of videos, photos and interviews that I wanted.

The problem is the sheer *size* of the field of comparison, which for the first time in history has become truly global. Of course most of us are not constantly busy measuring our place in the global playing field (if we did, it would probably lead to a sharp increase in suicides), but this global field is there as an implicit background to what we do.

Here we come to the dark secret of Homo globalis: the same computer monitor that makes creative work so much easier also provides an endless stream of information about the feats of the global world-class, information that invariably impacts Homo globalis’s self esteem. The mechanism that helped our ancestors not to fight to the death in the struggle for status, giving up and experiencing a mild depression, now becomes the basis of an epidemic. In the global I-Commodity Market each of us is beaten by some spectacular achievement somewhere in the globe thousands of times, daily.

Two of our age’s icons, Larry Page and Sergei Brin, now in their midthirties, have literally changed the world. Never mind the fact that they each have an estimated net-worth close \$20 billion. Their achievement goes way beyond the incredible financial and marketing success. They changed the way we use the World Wide Web and made it a matter of course for us that the first results of our searches almost invariably are what we were

really looking for (anyone still remember the frustration of the early search engines that brought you endless, useless sites?). In doing so they have also created another global rating scale, the number of Google entries each of us has, and their ranking status

Even the supposed sanctuary of western culture, academia, is at this point largely ruled by a rating system. It is, of course, supposed to be a completely objective system (even though there have been often acrimonious debates about its value) that combines the impact factors of the scientific journals in which you have been published and the number of citations that your work receives. In theory there should be one single number that measures your current market evaluation in your discipline.

So what matters more: the number of citations you have, or the number of Google entries? Or shouldn't all this be eclipsed by the fact that *Vanity Fair* has carried a profile on you? Or should you really care more about eternity and do research that may not get much media exposure, but might become a long-term contribution to your field?

The value of the I-Commodity is a complex amalgam of the various ranking systems. And we haven't even started to speak about the more local ranking systems. Are you popular with your friends? Do society columns write about you—and if they do, will this lower your ranking in academia? Do you easily get good tables at top restaurants on crowded evenings? How many New Year wishes do you get?

There are ranking systems that quite explicitly rank the self proper, without direct reference to any achievement: they are the purest expression of the global I-Commodity Market. The various social network sites do exactly that. Take Facebook: the most immediate datum of your commodity value is the number of friends you have. But there are further measures: how many of your friends are well-connected? How many of them are celebs? In other words: when someone looks at your friends in Facebook, how many of them will make people think that you are valuable or important?

It has actually come to the point where the ultimate snobbery is that of *not* having a profile in Facebook, LinkedIn, Zoom-Info or one of the many, many other social networking websites. Instead, you long to be a member of Smallworld, an exclusive website for the rich and famous to be joined by invitation only, the jet set that wants to be informed about the (presumably) most prestigious social events in the world.

Your ranking on the global I-Commodity Market does not only impact on your self-esteem; it also determines your possibilities—and these possibilities in turn impact on your self-esteem and well-being. It could be argued that you can only count as a Homo globalis if you are recognized by some of the global ranking systems. If you weren't, you wouldn't get a

position in one of the organizations that choose their employees or members according to their standing in the relevant ranking system.

In other words, Homo globalis is no longer just a manager or the owner of a self-portfolio. Homo globalis *is now the portfolio itself*; a commodity whose daily value depends on a myriad of factors, most of which are not under our control. The global “I” commodity market’s credo has therefore become “I am ranked, therefore I am.”

It is very difficult to ascertain what the impact of this global I-Commodity market is on Homo globalis’s well-being. There is research that shows that there is a dramatic increase in anxiety disorders, depression, and a huge rise in the use of antidepressant and antianxiety medication, mostly SSRIs (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors like Prozac, Paxil, Zoloft, etc).²⁷ Even though these results are problematic, because most of this research is funded by the companies that produce the drugs, they indicate an existing trend, and are as such frightening.

In any case they only point to the tip of the iceberg. Below the radar of explicitly psychopathological research there is a much more pervasive phenomenon: many members of Homo globalis suffer from a pervasive existential panic and from a persistent sense of failing to live lives that truly matter. I will show that most of this suffering is not psychopathological in nature, but reflects the impact of the global I-Commodity market on us all.