

Why Does What Exists Exist? Some Hypotheses on the Ultimate “Why” Question

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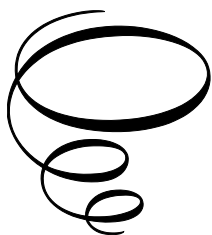
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Edited by

Mariano L. Bianca and Paolo Piccari

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

I OWN THEREFORE I AM: THE ONTOLOGY OF PROPERTY AND THE OBSESSION TO OWN

MARINA CHRISTODOULOU

“4 billion years after Nature created Life”¹ we still believe that we, humans, are the centre of the Earth and that Earth is the centre of the Cosmos or the Universe, therefore we are the centre of everything. But we are a part of cosmic connections not confined to Earth alone.² We think and live in terms of ownership of this part of the universe, which is Earth’s soil, where every part of this soil is owned by humans, who fight constantly to reform its borders.

The concept of Property is what attaches us to Existence, Being, and Life, instead of non-existence, non-Being and Non-life (or Death). I occupy, I possess, I own, therefore I am, therefore I exist. I own a body, therefore, I am a being; I also own a self, therefore I am.

What exists exists because we have the notion, the concept, the idea, the habit of property and of ownership. There is something rather than nothing because we own it. Why private property? Because we have the notion, the concept, the idea, the habit of property and of ownership. There is private property because we need to own things, including ourselves, and we need to own because we need to sign and vice versa. Maybe then, property is the

¹ Phrase from the Eric Meyers, Science Documentary hosted by Eric Meyers as part of the NG Earth Investigated Series. Produced by Pioneer Productions for National Geographic Channel, 2007. Available Online: <http://ihavenotv.com/birth-of-life-planet-science>, http://docuwiki.net/index.php?title=Planet_Science:_Birth_of_Life.

² See the Panspermia Theory put forth by Svante Arrhenius (1903) and Nalin Chandra Wickramasinghe, which proposed that life began on a comet (Hoyle–Wickramasinghe model of panspermia). For all these, see, for example, the Eric Meyers, *Planet Science: Birth of Life* (2007).

human's way or defense mechanism to compensate for nothingness and non-being. The human being *attaches* itself to possessions by habit, and even obsessively, in order to put itself in an anthropocentric place in the world. This is a defense mechanism designed to manage the reality of no actual property, of nothingness and non-being – more specifically, the reality of a *loan*.

The concept of ownership is more of a western ideal, therefore, one can learn a considerable amount by visiting the eastern philosophies and their view, or non-view, on property.

Without the notion, the habit, or even the obsession with Property, existence and non-existence, Being and non-Being, some-thingness and nothing-ness, would be the same thing.

James Heisig quotes, “[y]ou have lent us to each other, Lord, for a short while.”³ This is a Nahuatl prayer, which is indicative of the loan relationship we have with the things in the world. He continues by explaining, “nothing is really mine to ‘give’ in the first place, because nothing is ever mine to ‘keep’ for very long.”⁴ Death is the event that prohibits loan-ship from turning to ownership. Since we die, we are, throughout life, always floating between existence and non-existence, being and non-being. The need or the drive *to own*, instead of *to loan*, is a symptom of the will to persist, to not die, to live forever, to be immortal. In the definition of ownership lies the presumption that one owns something forever. Therefore, no “cease to exist” principle or reality is applicable. Property is the illusion of immortality and eternal existence.

The very first *loan*, which is transformed by humans into an illusion of property, is the *body*. Once we perceive the body as *ours*, as property, then every other thing in the world follows the same path. Along with the body, which is the most tangible and concrete expression or epiphenomenon of one's existence and being, comes the notion of the *self*. “Self is seen as epiphenomenon of no-self,”⁵ as James Heisig observes. In the vindication of human rights, this manifests as the very first right of a person to possess their body and their self. From there stem the questions and the declarations concerning free will and further rights. The declaration of the property of one's own body and self is simultaneously the cause *and* the effect of the

³ James W. Heisig, *Nothingness and Desire: An East-West Philosophical Antiphony* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013), 104.

⁴ Heisig, *Nothingness and Desire*, 104.

⁵ Heisig, *Nothingness and Desire*, 33.

attachment to the world, to life, to being, to existence, and the hatred and fear, of their “non-”counterparts. The cognitive binary of existence/being/life and their negations is even a symptom of this attachment, *habit*, or *addiction*, which reaches the boundaries of *obsession* with the positive notions of existence, being, life, and something-ness and accordingly a phobia of the negative ones of non-existence, non-being, death, and nothing-ness.

Western (mainly) Civilization (which is tautological to Patriarchy, and, by extension, to Capitalism) is built upon the idea(l) of property and how to keep it safe; ethics, laws, and theories are woven around it.⁶ The male human, firstly, suffers from the complex of not knowing if he is the father, and from there comes the desire to possess the female-mother, the child, and everything around him (to *sign* everything, in Derrida’s sense; there is a direct connection between the human need to *sign*, or for *signature*, in Derrida’s sense, and the need for property). This complex is the cornerstone of Civilization and its adjuncts or discontents. Eastern ontological thought can introduce us to the no/n-self, therefore, the no/n-property, and help us abandon the attachment, the habit, and even the obsession with existence and life.⁷

I would like to draw the attention to the observation that the notion of property goes hand in hand with the very basic concept of existence, which forms the field of Metaphysics. These concepts are very much linked to what we summarize as the western tradition of thought and the western world.

Locke and Fichte as Representatives of the Western Concept of Property

Maybe property is the motivation (and the motif) of civilization, because if there was no property there would not be any *signature*. In order (to be able) to *sign*, man passes through the ritual of becoming civilized: from the pre-civilized tendency of *marking* one’s aspired territory towards *signing* it.

⁶ One can get a glimpse of the level of complexity that Civilization and thought (philosophy, law, technology, science, religion, etc.) have reached regarding property in any book on property; a suggestion is Stephen R. Munzer, *A Theory of Property* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

⁷ See Bibliography, especially James W. Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness: An Essay on the Kyoto School* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2001), and Heisig, *Nothingness and Desire*.

Humans would not create most, or nearly all, of what we call Civilization (namely, science, technology, laws, etc.) if they would not get credit for them and thus own them, materially or/and spiritually, and *sign* them.

John Locke wrote:

[Freedom is] a Liberty to dispose and order freely as he lists his person, actions, possessions, and his whole property within the allowance of those laws under which he is, and therein not to be subject to the arbitrary will of another, but freely follow his own. [...] The great and chief end, therefore, of men uniting into commonwealths, and putting themselves under government, is the preservation of their property; [...].⁸

Fichte's theory holds similar views. To own or have property of something means that you have the right to exclude others from benefiting from it. This is similar to Locke's and Fichte's definition. Fichte mostly stated his views on property in his book *Foundations of Natural Right* (1797):⁹

There are, according to Fichte, two main original rights: the right to 'the continued existence of the absolute freedom and inviolability of the body', and the right to 'the continued existence of our free influence within the entire sensible world'.¹⁰

He, however, "refers to the idea of an original right as 'a mere fiction', and he even goes so far as to claim that there 'is no condition in which original rights exist; and no original rights of human beings'."¹¹ According to him, "there is no natural right [*Naturrecht*] at all in the sense often given to that term, i.e. there can be no rightful [*rechtliches*] relation between human beings except within a commonwealth [*in einem gemeinen Wesen*] and under positive laws'."¹²

⁸ John Locke, Robert Filmer, *Two Treatises on Civil Government: Preceded by Sir Robert Filmer's "Patriarcha"* (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1884), 219 (Book II. Chap. VI, §57), & 256 (Book II. Chap. IX, §124).

⁹ For an overview of his social and political theory, including the theory on property see David James, *Fichte's Social and Political Philosophy: Property and Virtue* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), esp. pp. 24, 26, 27, 28 & 35.

¹⁰ Fichte quoted in David James, *Fichte's Social and Political Philosophy*, 26.

¹¹ Fichte quoted in David James, *Fichte's Social and Political Philosophy*, 27.

¹² Fichte quoted in David James, *Fichte's Social and Political Philosophy*, 28.

Being and Non-Being, Self and No-Self: An Eastern-Western Comparative Approach of Property and Existence

Visiting eastern philosophy and engaging in a comparative study between the notion of property, self, no-self, being, and non-being, will help us better understand our obsession with property, how it defines our worldview, and how central it is to it. Zhihua Yao explores very well these matters in his paper “The Cognition of Nonexistent Objects. Five Yogācāra Arguments” (2014), where he writes:

Ever since Leibniz, the fundamental question of metaphysics has been: “Why is there something rather than nothing?” But before we can start to ponder this problem, we should have some sense of the meanings of the terms “being” (or “what there is”) and “nothing” (or “what there is not”). Philosophers throughout history have devoted themselves to these two subjects by developing the field of ontology.¹³

John Krummel in his essay “Anontology and the Issue of Being and Nothing in Kitarō Nishida” (2014) observes similarly that “Nishida reiterates this contrast by stating that the thought of being is at the root of Western culture while the thought of the nothing is at the root of Eastern culture.”¹⁴

As a last example of this I will refer to Xiaogan Liu’s essay “The Notion of Wu or Nonbeing as the Root of the Universe and a Guide for Life,”¹⁵ where he says that there is even a relevant distinction between the Chinese and Western philosophical methodology and meta-philosophy. He writes:

Lao points out the general idea that Chinese philosophy is “philosophy as proposal,” whose function is to present an orientation for the world and human life. Thus, Chinese philosophy might have less explanatory power, but it is strong in its “orientating power”.¹⁶

¹³ Zhihua Yao, “The Cognition of Nonexistent Objects. Five Yogācāra Arguments,” in *Nothingness in Asian Philosophy*, ed. JeeLoo Liu and Douglas L. Berger (New York: Routledge, 2014), 133.

¹⁴ John W.M. Krummel, “Anontology and the Issue of Being and Nothing in Kitarō Nishida,” in *Nothingness in Asian Philosophy*, 263.

¹⁵ Xiaogan Liu, “The Notion of Wu or Nonbeing as the Root of the Universe and a Guide for Life,” in *Nothingness in Asian Philosophy*, esp. pp. 145, 264, 280.

¹⁶ Xiaogan Liu, “The Notion of Wu or Nonbeing as the Root of the Universe and a Guide for Life,” 160.

Property and Signature: The “I” as Landlord of Body, Mind, Self, and the World

As said, there is a direct connection between the human need to *sign*, or for *signature*, in Derrida’s sense, and the need for property.¹⁷ Even the self, the body, the ideas, and the habits, are perceived as property or possessions. There is an “I” that is the agent behind all those categories, which “I” is the landlord of everything that constitutes this “I” and the world around it. This happens primarily in the western culture and thought, especially after Descartes. As James Heisig writes and explains well throughout his book *Nothingness and Desire: An East-West Philosophical Antiphony* (2013):

In the philosophical traditions of India and China that influenced the development of Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian thought throughout Eastern Asia, the idea of “self” is understood as a flight from the reality of nothingness into the illusory world of desire. Self is seen an epiphenomenon of no-self. This extends both to the subject-object mode of thought and to the notion of a substantial self.¹⁸

He later writes, referring to the western tradition:

Anything can become property, including the way we accumulate it and the way we define ourselves as owners. But just as the actual food we consume is not the reason for hunger, so the possessions we own are not the reason for the desire to own them. The illusion that it is lies behind more than the drive to accumulate more and more things. [...] At a very basic level, then, a direct line can be drawn from the drive to increase one’s possessions to the belief that human rationality is the reason for the existence of the natural world, and that free will is the reason for our desires to have and to hold things as one’s “own” belongings. In short, the de defining of possessions as one’s own discloses a fundamental dualism in the way of seeing the world.¹⁹

And in relation to the *signature* that I aforementioned here is what Heisig says:

¹⁷ See, Geoffrey Bennington, “The Signature,” in *Jacques Derrida*, ed. Geoffrey Bennington (University of Chicago Press, 1999), 148-166; Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, trans. John P. Leavy Jr. and Richard Rand (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 184 and elsewhere; and Jacques Derrida, *SignéPonge = Signsponge*, trans. Richard Rand (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 48, 52, 56 and the whole book.

¹⁸ Heisig, *Nothingness and Desire*, 33.

¹⁹ Heisig, *Nothingness and Desire*, 103.

[...] When a child is given a toy, the immediate reaction is to keep it for his own. Property rights have been transferred and the child becomes its owner. This same ownership is claimed by the giver, who retains ownership of what was apparently given away by the expectation of being remembered as the giver. [...]

The transformation of possessions into property on loan is an act of no-self but it is performed by a self living in the world. [...] Everything “belongs” to a self with the mind of no-self because nothing is possessed and nothing is excluded from the *proprium* of the self. Possessions are always imperfectly owned; property is always completely one’s own. [...]

Things may happen to me that do not happen to others, even intensely ecstatic or religious experiences, but they are never mine alone. They are fleeting constellation of reality, a coming together of things whose temporality lies beyond the reach of the self’s dominion.²⁰

Attaching onto things is nearly an obsessive-compulsive need of humans in order to circumscribe their individuality, identity and their self, or live in their own skin. Heisig writes:

Attaching ourselves to things, as well as to our ideas about things, holding fast to what will sooner or later be taken from us, is no doubt the cause of much unnecessary suffering, mental as well as physical. Behind it all lies the desire for attachment to the objects of desires. [...]

[...] The *proprium* of one’s own identity as an individual requires a conscious mind that fixes itself on some memories and persists in some habits to the exclusion of others. [...]

[...] At the same time, we have the dreamy attachment to life to thank for the continuity of consciousness from one day to the next, for the ability to forget or repress most of what we experience, and indeed for actually doing something with our lives.²¹

Heisig in another book titled *Philosophers of Nothingness: An Essay on the Kyoto School* (2001) explains more thoroughly:

In a splendid but demanding 1962 essay on “Western Thought and Buddhism,” he [Nishitani] tries to show how the idea of the non-ego can help to solve a problem inherent in western philosophy and above all in its

²⁰ Heisig, *Nothingness and Desire*, 105.

²¹ Heisig, *Nothingness and Desire*, 108.

mystical tradition, namely the addiction to the category of selfhood in defining the human and the absolute.²²

It comes to a point that the tendency to own and to consume everything that we own becomes our viewpoint of the world, or our worldview. The split of mind and body, especially from Descartes and later, adds to this tendency to own and to fragmentize the “I” into multiple parts, where each owns another. For example, the mind owns the body, its actions, instincts, and desires, and the “I” owns the mind, its decisions and habits. It is important to note how owning one’s own body is a kind of a rebellion against the first owner of every human’s body, who is the mother, it is again the patriarchal mentality of the hero arising against the mother; maybe this is one psychoanalytical, and very physiological, explanation of the origins of property:

One needs to hold on to possessions; properties hold on to us, and we to them. This is no less true of the view we have of the world. To turn it into a kind of philosophical quilt to keep one warm is to make it an extension of the skin, as if it were something that belonged to the self, which it is not.

[...] When we refer to our possessions as “belongings,” we often imply that they are part of our identity, and we speak of property as if it were something we can store up, squat on, and surround ourselves with.

The body is our way of remembering; disembodiment is our way of forgetting.

To be born into the world is to be released from enclosure in our mother’s skin and be wrapped in a skin all our own. [...] When I pronounce the word “I,” I imply that my body and mind own each other, that they are both my own without either owning the other. The fact that eastern philosophies have to insist so often on the unity of body and mind attests to the fact that it is easily disrespected or forgotten.

In contrast, the nearly universal tendency to treat one’s own body as a possession owned by the mind or soul or spirit became enshrined in modern philosophy with Descartes, [...]

The image of the body as something owned by the mind is based on the spatial metaphors of possessing things, while the mind—both conscious and unconscious—is assumed to carry one’s “proper” identity.²³

²² Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness*, 228.

²³ Heisig, *Nothingness and Desire*, 106-107.

Consumption is never merely bodily; it is also a way of interpreting the earth.²⁴

Moreover, another important observation to make is that writing was invented (probably in Assyria) not to write art, or philosophy, and science, but to write down and remember who owns what to whom. This presupposes that the concept and habit of property is already there. Therefore, writing is another reminiscent of Patriarchy and the male. Then came the manipulation of writing, in order to control, with laws, etc. The *habit of property* is also connected to the *habit to archive*, which in its part is connected to the *habit to sign (signature)*. To *archive* is to increase property, a property, one's property, the humankind's property.

Knowledge, faith, race, gender or sex, rights, the earth (in the conceptual sense, namely meaning the world), memories, and all other kinds of abstracts are dealt in terms of property: one owns them or not, and when one does "own" abstracts, then in the case of the aforementioned examples, that's the birthplace of authoritarianism, fundamentalism, racism, sexism, privilege, specism along with anthropocentricity, and a continuous narcissistic personal-identity-narrative, respectively. The whole mentality of owning, or of "having" as Erich Fromm more mildly described it,²⁵ is

²⁴ Heisig, *Nothingness and Desire*, 110.

²⁵ See, Erich Fromm (1976), *To Have or to Be?* (New York, London: Continuum, 1997), 63-64: "The nature of the having mode of existence follows from the nature of private property. In this mode of existence all that matters is my acquisition of property and my unlimited right to keep what I have acquired. The having mode excludes others; it does not require any further effort on my part to keep my property or to make productive use of it. The Buddha has described this mode of behavior as craving, the Jewish and Christian religions as coveting; it transforms everybody and everything into some thing dead and subject to another's power. The sentence "I have something" expresses the relation between the subject, *I* (or he, we, you, they), and the object, *O*. It implies that the subject is permanent and the object is permanent. [...] If I seem to have everything, I have-in reality-nothing, since my having, possessing, controlling an object is only a transitory moment in the process of living. [...] My property constitutes myself and my identity. [...] In the having mode, there is no alive relationship between me and what I have. It and I have become things, and I have *it*, because I have the force to make it mine. But there is also a reverse relationship: *it has me*, because my sense of identity, i.e., of sanity, rests upon my having *it* (and as many things as possible). The having mode of existence is not established by an alive, productive process between subject and object; it makes *things* of both object and subject. The relationship is one of deadness, not aliveness." For more in line with the Marxist basic view of the property (and how it interrelates with the Family, the State, Patriarchy, Capital, etc.), see especially, Friedrich Engels

fascistic in itself, and it goes both ways: what we own, owns us back. In strictly Buddhist terms we don't know anything, even not our existence, even thought from our perspective existence exists, we exist, we *are*, because we *own*.

Individuality is another abstract thing,²⁶ along with the self,²⁷ cognitive agency,²⁸ etc., that we think we own. But we are not even proper individuals, and more precisely not even proper or completely humans!

Fragmentation as a Western Bias: The Case of No-Self

I would briefly define Fragmentation thus: the *Property* or the *Possession* of Dissonant Ideas or Things, or Ideas Dissonant to Things, or Things Dissonant to Ideas.

The fragmented or compartmentalized self is a neurosis spread in the western habits and, mainly, habits of thought, very much due to the monotheistic religions. Western thought is placing great attention on the attachment to things, to a degree of owning them, or regarding them as one's

(1884), *The origin of the family, private property, and the state*, trans. Alick West. New Introduction by Tristram Hunt (Penguin Classics, 2010).

²⁶ See, Nigel Goldenfeld "Indiv-duality," in *This Idea Must Die: Scientific Theories That Are Blocking Progress* (Edge Question Series), ed. John Brockman (Harper Perennial, 2015), 55-56. E-pub (pages may vary): "However, there's another point. It's not just that you're a composite, something you already knew, but you're in some senses not even human. You have perhaps 100 trillion bacterial cells in your body, numbering 10 times more than your human cells and containing 100 times as many genes as your human cells. These bacteria aren't just passive occupants of the zoo that is you. They self-organize into communities within your mouth, guts, and elsewhere, and these communities—microbiomes—are maintained by varied, dynamic patterns of competition and cooperation between the various bacteria, which allows us to live."

²⁷ See, Bruce Hood, "The Self," in *This Idea Must Die: Scientific Theories That Are Blocking Progress*, 215-217; and Dan Zahavi, Mark Siderits and Evan Thompson ed., *Self, No Self?: Perspectives from Analytical, Phenomenological, and Indian Traditions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

²⁸ See, Thomas Metzinger, *Being No One: The Self-Model Theory of Subjectivity* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003); Thomas Metzinger, *The Ego Tunnel: The Science of the Mind and the Myth of the Self* (New York: Basic Books, 2009); Thomas Metzinger, "Cognitive Agency," In *This Idea Must Die: Scientific Theories That Are Blocking Progress*, 218-222; and Thomas Metzinger, "Précis of Being no one," [Review of the book *Being no one*. T. Metzinger], *Psyche: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Consciousness* 11 (2005): 1-35.

(the “I’s”) property. One is pushed to this disposition and need, or even neurosis *to own*, because of the western obsession with the owning (*property*) of a unified self, which will serve as a basis layer of the unified consciousness, and therefore, the individual identity.

In the western perception, you exist only and only if you own a distinctive and exclusive self, a consciousness of this self, and the self-narrative you are required to build. This self-narrative must be free of formal logic contradictions and other fallacies and errors. If a strong identity, free of logical fallacies and errors has failed to be built, by the “I”, then the “I” does *not* exist, and along with it the person, the agent, or the human hosting the “I”.

In order to keep in accordance with these prerequisites of existence, as a kind of defense-mechanism (psychoanalytically speaking), we built a series of habits that abide to the aforementioned terms, and we obsessively follow them, which in turn define back our identity, personality, consciousness, self, and the “I” of each human being. These habits, eventually and ultimately, define our life; become our life.

The awareness of this *neurotic* cycle of habits and attachment is at the core of eastern philosophies, and within some thinkers in the western tradition that do not make the canon. One particular western philosopher with different axioms concerning the self is Alexius Meinong (*theory of objects* [*Gegenstandstheorie*], non-existent objects, *self-presentation* [*Selbstpräsentation*], etc.). Another one is Thomas Metzinger, with his books *Being No One: The Self-model Theory of Subjectivity* and *The Ego Tunnel: The Science of the Mind and the Myth of the Self*.²⁹

One should focus on these western “heretics” and on the philosophies of the so called “no-self”, in order to see how fragmentation survives, if it does, there, or how it is transformed, when the basic habit, prejudice or bias of the

²⁹ See, Francesco Berto, *Existence as a Real Property: The Ontology of Meinongianism*, Synthese Library (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013); Dale Jacquette, *Alexius Meinong, the Shepherd of Non-Being*, Volume 360 of Synthese Library (Dordrecht: Springer, 2015); Alexius Meinong (1904), “The Theory of Objects,” in *Realism and the Background of Phenomenology*, ed. Roderick M. Chisholm; trans. Isaac Levi, D.B. Terrell, and Roderick M. Chisholm (Illinois: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1960), 76-117; Kenneth J. Perszyk, *Nonexistent Objects: Meinong and Contemporary Philosophy* (Dordrecht; London: Kluwer Academic, 1993); and Metzinger, *Being No One*; Metzinger, *The Ego Tunnel*; Metzinger, “Cognitive Agency”; and Metzinger, “Précis of Being no one.”

western thought we have inherited, which is the self as an individual identity made of logically correct elements, is removed.

Conclusions

We establish and confirm our *existence* with *property*, at the point that they become synonymous. We even *own* our selves and our habits.

We are endeavoring to stretch our skin, so much that it can contain the world, instead of accommodating *into* the skin *of* the world. It is exactly this *stretching* that induces all the suffering, which, on a large scale, characterizes our existence.

Money is the magical token, the ownership of which can be redeemed with all types of properties and possessions. It is a kind of metaphysical property.

We do not *own* even life itself, or “our” body is not ours, nor “our” self; they all surrogates, using Paul Weiss’ terminology (Weiss 2003); surrogates of what? Of addiction of course. The illusion of ownership is a coping mechanism (as psychologists would say) or rather a stratagem/technic of the addiction to life.³⁰ You have to cope to *be* in order to devote into an obsession-addiction of stubbornly being.

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³⁰ The “addiction to life” is the subject of my PhD Thesis (in progress).

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