

Modern Age, Thoughtlessness and Nazi Germany Propaganda, in Hannah Arendt's work

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Abstract.

The mechanism of propaganda allied to the dominance of modern science played a major role in limiting the masses' scope of thinking during Nazi Germany. Using a detailed analysis of Hannah Arendt's works on the human condition and totalitarian regimes, and supporting them by Edward Bernays' studies on propaganda, the present paper focuses on two essential points. One of them is the connection between the modern age and the human ability to think. According to Arendt, the rise of modern science revolutionized western tradition and prepared the ground for the prevalence of thoughtlessness, the inability to think. The second point is correlated with the mechanism of Nazi propaganda and the way its scientificity helped dismantling society's inherent plurality by manipulating people's minds, creating new necessities, indoctrinating masses for an intended purpose, and therefore encouraging the inability to perform a meaningful inner dialogue. Hannah Arendt's philosophy is timeless for its urgent importance. It raises fundamental questions that promote meaningful debate about the way we think and act, which can lead Humanity to prevent atrocities like those of the past and motivate a growing awareness for the future.

Keywords: Hannah Arendt, Modern Age, Nazi Germany, Propaganda, Thoughtlessness.

1. Introduction

In 1961, Hannah Arendt covered Adolf Eichmann's trial for *The New Yorker*. The former Nazi member stood in court as one of the main organisers of the Holocaust and the "Final Solution of the Jewish Question" (Arendt, 1994, p. 21). Arendt called her report *Eichmann in Jerusalem: a report on the banality of evil*, stating that Eichmann was neither "demonic nor monstrous", but instead an ordinary human being, with no strong ideological convictions and no signs of evilness in his motives (Arendt, 1971, p. 4). The only explanation Arendt was able to discern for such evil deeds performed by a vulgar person, was the manifestation of thoughtlessness, the inability to think (Arendt, 1994).

Although the figure of Eichmann strengthened the concept of thoughtlessness in the philosopher's understanding, by establishing a deeper connection between the former

and evil, the idea of inability to think was already present in Arendt's previous works. On *The Human Condition*, Hanna Arendt argues that the advent of the modern age caused a reversal of contemplation and action (Arendt, 1958). It was considered a turning point since both philosophy and thinking became mere handmaidens of science (Arendt, 1958). This gradual scientificity of modern society is meaningfully linked, in this author's work, not only to thoughtlessness but also, to the mechanism of totalitarian propaganda.

This essay will discuss how the rise of the modern age has contributed to the loss of the ability to think and how the mechanism of Nazi Germany propaganda reflects this contribution, in Arendt's work. There are two points worth mentioning. One of them is the mechanism of propaganda itself, already a scientific endeavour, and the way it supported the "men of gigantic dimensions" by manipulating people's minds, creating new necessities, indoctrinating masses to serve an intended purpose, and therefore encouraging the inability to perform a meaningful inner dialogue (Arendt, 1973, p. 466). The other point is correlated with the scientificity of this mechanism and what it promoted. When writing about propaganda and organisation, Adolf Hitler stated the following: "A movement which in a time of majority rule orients itself in all things on the principle of the leader idea and the responsibility conditioned by it will someday with *mathematical* certainty overcome the existing state of affairs and emerge victorious" (Hitler, 1969, p. 536-537). This mathematical certainty expresses the strong scientific trait that characterised Nazi Germany propaganda. The connection between the modern age, thoughtlessness, and totalitarian propaganda is considerably formulated in Hannah Arendt's work.

2.1 The rise of modern science and thoughtlessness

Hannah Arendt associates the rise of the modern age with three important world events: Europeans' arrival to America and the consequent exploration of the New World; the Reformation and the following secularization and accumulation of social wealth; and, lastly, the invention of the telescope by Galileo Galilei (Arendt, 1958). The latter was of the utmost importance for the reverse of contemplation and action in the seventeenth-century western world. This reverse established the separation of science from philosophy, doing from thinking (whereas contemplation, the "beholding of truth", was completely excluded) (Arendt, 1958, p. 291). After Galileo's discoveries, philosophy lost its strength and thinking became the handmaiden of action, subjected to a new paradigm that considered possible an "over-all interpretation of the nature of human knowledge" (Arendt, 1958, p. 294). In other words, the rise of modern science gave birth to the premise that men can grasp the hidden order of Nature, merely by resorting to their inner patterns of mind (Arendt, 1958). This principle, in the author's perspective, set off an ongoing thirst for knowledge, believed to be the truth and available to men, through *processes* that decode the Universe (Arendt, 1971). The emphasis placed on processes is significant. Nature itself became an ongoing process, invisible, secret, and accessible to men through experimentation (Arendt, 1958). Inextricably linked to this is the idea of progress as an unending quest for knowledge and the truth, an assumption that a few centuries later, became the "most cherished

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dogma of all men living in a scientifically oriented world” (Arendt, 1971, p. 26). As Hannah Arendt (1958) asserts:

For the mentality of modern man, as it was determined by the development of modern science and the concomitant unfolding of modern philosophy, it was at least as decisive that man began to consider himself part and parcel of the two superhuman, all-encompassing processes of nature and history, both of which seemed doomed to an infinite progress without ever reaching any inherent telos or approaching any preordained idea (p. 307).

In this observation, it becomes evident that the rise of modern science and modern philosophy with its emphasis on men’s “instrumental reason”, planted the seeds of upcoming metanarratives that were foundational to totalitarian regimes. On the one hand, “reason” could grasp the laws of Nature and determine future events. According to Nazi ideology, the natural order of things would, certainly, lead to the triumph of the Aryan race. On the other hand, “reason” could decipher History as a large march of events that would, eventually, lead to a defined end. For instance, Stalinism, following Marx’s historical materialism, assumed the course of History would lead the world to a classless society. These collective narratives alienated individual reason and, consequently, menaced human plurality, considered by Arendt as the “law of the earth” (Arendt, 1971, p. 19). If what was left was an endless life process, to which all human activities were subjected, then men’s thoughts became, too, mere processes of a major force (Arendt, 1958). Individuality was submitted to this collective force and, consequently, the plurality of human life (constituted by the sum of all individualities) was, equally, threatened. In Arendt’s words: “thought itself (...) became a function of the brain, with the result that electronic instruments are found to fulfil these functions much better than we ever could” (Arendt, 1958, p. 322). Instrumental reason, a concept prevalent in eighteenth-century thinking, had the utility of a tool used to grasp knowledge, to calculate, to decode Nature and History, but neglected meaning. In other words, human life, in general, and human ability to think, in particular, became superfluous and meaningless as never before.

In her later work *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt presents, following Immanuel Kant’s philosophy, an important distinction that extends what was mentioned above. The distinction between reason and intellect, thinking and knowing, meaning and cognition. As far as modern science is concerned, its goal is a continuing quest for knowledge acquired through cognition, a quality of human intellect and without an absolute end in mind, but, solely, leaning on the possibility of unlimited progress (Arendt, 1971). The quest for meaning, according to Kant and Arendt, is a completely different thing. It is not so much about wanting to know, but more about the “urgent need to think” (Arendt, 1971, p. 15). And by “thinking” Arendt means the inner dialogue of me with myself (“in which we examine what we say and what we do”) (Arendt, 1971, p. 191). It is not the same as knowledge – the acquisition of information through cognition and repetition - but an awareness that allows us to tell good from bad, right from wrong, beautiful from ugly (Arendt, 1971). An inner dialogue that, when in harmony, the two-dialoguing

become one. It takes a constant avoidance of this intimate conversation, either wittingly, or by a complete inability to perform it caused by external factors manipulating our minds, to make room for atrocious deeds, such as Arendt witnessed in Eichmann.

This thoughtlessness is a chief factor for the understanding of totalitarian regimes. It is a mental condition in the sense that makes people susceptible to new ideas, circumstances, however unrealistic or inhuman they might be. Hanna Arendt states that “the more firmly men hold to the old code, the more eager will they be to assimilate themselves to the new one” (Arendt, 1971, p. 177). The dogma is, indeed, the product of a desperate need to fill an emptiness that is uncertain and uncomfortable. In Arendt’s opinion, those who follow rules without questioning or examining them (as Eichmann seems to have done), are the ones more likely to not engage in any inner dialogue and, therefore, prone to fill the emptiness and follow whatever conduct is asked of them. This was what happened in Nazi Germany, where the “basic commandments of western morality were reversed” (Arendt, 1971, p. 177) and one of the mechanisms used to disseminate thoughtlessness was, indeed, propaganda.

2.2 The mechanism of propaganda

Nazi Germany propaganda is related to the rise of modern science and the concept of inability to think in two important points: firstly, it is characterised by a strong scientificity, product of the modern age, not only in the way it was performed but also in what it promoted; secondly, it is a mechanism that promotes thoughtlessness.

In 1928, Edward Bernays, an Austrian-American specialist in public relations, defined propaganda as a “mechanism by which ideas are disseminated on a large scale” (Bernays, 1928, p. 20). In his book *Propaganda*, Bernays (1928) revealed to the reader how this mechanism was a tool used by the minority to control the majority through manipulation of their minds, in order to create new circumstances and, consequently, new patterns of thought and a new vision of the world. Also, he referred to studies of mass psychology of the time, stating that the practice of propaganda was no longer a mere empirical activity (Bernays, 1928). Its scientific character was acknowledged by the study of mass psychology, which had recently discovered that groups’ mental characteristics differed from those of individuals (Bernays, 1928). The former is driven by impulses and emotions that do not resemble those in individual psychology (Bernays, 1928). It is indeed possible, he asserted, “to control and regiment the masses (...) at least up to a certain point and within certain limits” (Bernays, 1928, p. 47). Propaganda became, according to Bernays (1928), a scientific endeavour,

(...) in the sense that it seeks to base its operations upon definite knowledge drawn from direct observation of the group mind, and upon the application of principles which have been demonstrated to be consistent and relatively constant (p. 48).

Accordingly, the group mind does not think in the way Arendt describes it, but instead, is moved by emotions, impulses, and habits (Bernays, 1928). Therefore, the propagandist, in order to control the group mind and create new circumstances, had to affect emotions, influence impulses and use consistency and repetition to create new habits (Bernays, 1928). It was one of the doctrines of reaction psychology that a certain stimulus often repeated would create a habit, or that a mere reiteration of an idea would create a conviction (Bernays, 1928).

The mechanism of propaganda was used by Nazi Germany thoroughly. Adolf Hitler considered it an indispensable preliminary element of the regime, one that led and solidified the organization of the movement (Hitler, 1969). The task of the propagandist was to gather followers and indoctrinate them: make them understand and accept the aim of the movement and, passively, follow it (Hitler, 1969). It sufficed the movement's purpose if the followers merely believed in the political doctrine. In Hitler's words, "understanding in its passive form corresponds to the majority of mankind which is lazy and cowardly" (Hitler, 1969, p. 529). Matching Bernays' study, Hitler saw in propaganda a means to disrupt previous convictions and beliefs that do not serve the movement and make room for new thought processes (Hitler, 1969). These would create a new worldview – *Weltanschauung* – and allow the movement to prevail efficiently (Hitler, 1969).

All the above mentioned is meaningfully linked to Arendt's concept of thinking and non-thinking and Kant's distinction of thinking and knowing. This mechanism manipulates peoples' convictions and beliefs through repetition and reiteration. In other words, it works with information, with artificial facts, not with questions or doubts that might incite critical thinking. Accordingly, beliefs and convictions do not belong to the sphere of reason, the quest for meaning formulated by Kant and supported by Arendt. Philosophical thinking leads to constant questioning and examination. It promotes the inner dialogue that doubts the information received and discerns, critically, whether it is right or wrong, good or bad, ugly or beautiful. In short, propaganda abolishes this inner dialogue. Its purpose is to compel people to do what the propagandist wants them to do. No questions asked.

2.3 The scientificity of Nazi Germany propaganda

Nazi Germany propaganda, in many ways, met Edward Bernays' study. Indeed, it played with the masses' emotions by inciting fear through conspiracy theories that made reality an obnoxious world, one to be avoided at all costs (Arendt, 1973). Also, it threatened resistance of the group mind, either by accusing them of living against the laws of Nature or by dooming them to corrosion of blood (Arendt, 1973). Furthermore, it played with hope, placed on the other side of the emotional spectrum, advocating with certainty that their doctrine would triumph and feeding consistently the new fictitious worldview that, as Arendt asserted, fitted more "the needs of human minds than reality itself" (Arendt, 1973, p. 353). The masses were people full of fears and anxieties, who felt misplaced in such a complex reality that seemed to constantly forget about them (Arendt, 1973). Thus, they craved security, victory, an end to all their

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suffering and confusion. This emotional juggle created an urge of following the trusted leader and the simplicity of the fictitious world. Then, the consistency of repetition and reiteration of empty truths kept this fiction continuously plausible, at least inside the totalitarian territory, creating new habits for the followers and allowing the movement to endure smoothly.

None of this would be possible without the strong trait of scientificity evidenced in mass propaganda.

Scientificity of mass propaganda has indeed been so universally employed in modern politics that it has been interpreted as a more general sign of that obsession with science which has characterized the Western world since the rise of mathematics and physics in the sixteenth century; thus totalitarianism appears to be only the last stage in a process during which “science [has become] an idol that will magically cure the evils of existence and transform the nature of man” (Arendt, 1973, p. 345).

Indeed, there was a clear predominance and veneration of science in Nazi Germany propaganda, used to justify the movement’s teachings and predictions. This scientific Nature can be summed up in three important points stated in Arendt’s work, that are interconnected and somehow overlap one another, but are useful for the topic discussed here. Those are the following: scientific prophecy, the infallibility of prediction, and, inextricably linked to these, a disciplined consistency on the propagation of the narratives.

The first of these factors, the scientific prophecy, presented racism, Aryan’s superiority, and its future triumph as a product of the natural order of things. A mere result of the laws of Nature, the hidden forces of the world, that were leading Aryans to victory (Arendt, 1973). Nazi prophecies such as the ones Arendt used as examples, “the more accurately we recognize and observe the laws of nature and life (...) the more insight we have into the will of the Almighty, the greater will be our successes”; “we shape the life of our people and our legislation according to the verdicts of genetics” (Arendt, 1973, p. 346, 350), clearly evidence the power of science in the build-up of Nazi regime. It embraced an all-encompassing narrative that regarded Nature as the major process controlling the chain of events and promised a successful future for those who surrendered to it. Nazi Germany’s scientific prophecies assumed it was possible and, truly, predestined the transformation of human nature (Arendt, 1973). Whatever means used to attain it, good or bad, were for the greater good and by using prophetic language they would justify their acts. This can be slightly connected with the emphasis that modern science placed on the process and the dogma of unlimited progress. In the same way, life itself became, in the eyes of the scientists, an endless process to which all human activities were subjected, the primacy of Aryans, which was the fate intended by the reliable forces of Nature, became the centre of the Nazi movement and its processes. If to the scientist, all processes would lead to the unravelling of the laws of Nature, to the Nazis, all processes would lead to the infallible fate of German hegemony.

According to Arendt, the scientific character of those prophetic narratives gave them an element of infallibility that was put forward singularly. Political goals were

announced in the shape of prophecies, giving an infallible image to their leader (Arendt, 1973). Also, this approach of stating political intentions in form of prophecies and, later, making them come true, was another means of leading the masses to trust their fictitious world (Arendt, 1973). For each prophecy that became reality would feel like a puzzle being gradually completed. Arendt uses Hitler's announcement to the German Reichstag in January 1939, as an example of this effect on the infallibility of Nazi propaganda. Indeed, in his speech Hitler states as a prophecy the extermination of the Jews:

I want today once again to make a prophecy: in case the Jewish financiers...succeed once more in hurling the peoples into a world war, the result will be...the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe (Arendt, 1973, p. 349).

The annihilation of the Jewish people was, therefore, turned into something inevitable. An event inserted in the historical process and submitted to immutable laws, that would, inexorably, happen (Arendt, 1973). Hannah Arendt adds something important when she states that it "cannot be doubted that the Nazi leadership actually believed" in all these narratives (Arendt, 1973, p. 345-346). It was not a mere fiction to them. Like the scientist who believed he was deciphering the invisible order of Nature and the Universe, unaware that whatever answers he got would be a product of his own mind, the Nazi leadership believed they were nobly unravelling and accelerating the hidden truth of Nature. Irrespective of its inhumane consequences.

This scientificity of Nazi Germany propaganda was fundamental to raise the masses. It gave them the sense of security and predictability their emotions and impulses were urging for. Fear, anxiety, confusion towards the world's complexity, and a consequent sense of inadequacy played important roles in the surrender of the masses to the appellative scientific discourse. Common sense was lost and, in its place, an intense suspicion towards the reality outside the new fabricated world (Arendt, 1973). On the one hand, they relied on the scientific discourse and its apparent authority, on the other hand, they did not look for matching it with actual reality (Arendt, 1973). Instead, they lived embracing those prophetic narratives and believing in them, even if they could only be possible when imagined (since they were focused on the future, something yet to come) (Arendt, 1973). The strong assimilation of these narratives by the masses did not have its origin only on the imposed infallibility of predictions, or its scientific appearance but, essentially, in its consistency. As Edward Bernays asserted, the constant repetition and reiteration of those stories, empty truths, and self-fulfilling prophecies, convinced the masses efficiently (Bernays, 1928). In Arendt's words, it replaced the "fortuitousness that pervades reality" and its "coincidences" with the consistency of "an all-embracing omnipotence which is supposed to be at the root of every accident" (Arendt, 1973, p. 351-352).

Two significant examples can clearly express the consistency of Nazi Germany propaganda. The first example is related to the Jewish world conspiracy. The consistency in which this narrative was taken ahead was as great as turning the topic of antisemitism into a matter of self-definition and no longer a subject open to debate or differing opinions (Arendt, 1973). For instance, non-Jewish ancestry became a

mandatory requirement to become a member of the regime (Arendt, 1973). Also, the anti-Semitic propaganda ended up being an instrument of unity among the masses, giving them a common ground and appealing to their self-esteem and self-respect, enhanced by its collective non-Jewish family history (Arendt, 1973). Another important fact regarding the Jewish world conspiracy and its consistency was the created illusion of an already existing Jewish domination of the world (Arendt, 1973). This fiction was taken as far as the Nazi movement acting as if the world was truly ruled by the Jews and using the Protocols of the Elders of Zion to convince the masses that world conquest was possible through organisation (Arendt, 1973). Then, they channelled that implemented idea to create another fiction - the German world conquest, named *Volksgemeinschaft* (Arendt, 1973). In order to achieve it, Nazi propaganda used elements of plausibility such as, for example, “the non-public influence of the Jews in the past” (Arendt, 1973, p. 362). Arendt (1973) explains the reason why:

Their art consists in using, and at the same time transcending, the elements of reality, of verifiable experiences, in the chosen fiction, and in generalizing them into regions which then are definitely removed from all possible control by individual experience. With such generalizations, totalitarian propaganda establishes a world fit to compete with the real one, whose main handicap is that it is not logical (p. 362).

As if all the members and their followers were going through a collective hallucination and were no longer capable of distinguishing what was fantasy and what was reality. The element of consistency was indispensable to feed this hallucination and avoid any cracks that would dissolve it.

The second example that expresses the extreme consistency of Nazi Germany propaganda and helped to maintain this fictitious world was the incredibly fabricated code of language. Hannah Arendt was highly aware of it when writing the report on the Eichmann trial, pointing out the inability of the latter to “utter a single sentence that wasn’t a cliché” and his full engagement in “language rules” that concealed the reality of the events (Arendt, 1994, p. 48, 85). This code of language reflected itself, for example, in the S.S. way of “talking about the concentration camps in terms of «administration» or about extermination camps in terms of «economy»” (Arendt, 1994, p. 69). The term “Final Solution” was another mask that hid the actual definition of what was really going on in the camps. Extermination, annihilation, liquidation, murder, killing were the type of words hidden behind that mask (Arendt, 1994). They shielded people from the horrors of the Holocaust. During the Eichmann trial, there was a significant moment that manifests this code language and how it was embedded in people’s minds. Dr. Servatius mentioned gas killing as a medical matter and, when questioned about it, simply replied “it was indeed a medical matter since it was prepared by physicians; it was a matter of killing, and killing too, is a medical matter” (Arendt, 1994, p. 69). This scientific and objective attitude of fabricating the language so it would not appeal to negative emotions and, perhaps, second thoughts about the morality of the events being executed, went as far as making gas killing a neutral, scientific matter. Hannah Arendt suggests the following:

None of the various “language rules”, carefully contrived to deceive and to camouflage, had a more decisive effect on the mentality of the killers than this first war decree of Hitler, in which the word for “murder” was replaced by the phrase “to grant a mercy death” (Arendt, 1994, p. 108).

This strategy of concealing reality through a new coded language, making use of euphemisms to hide horror, was a significant mechanism carried out with disciplined consistency. It was indispensable to maintain people’s minds trapped in an unrealistic worldview. Also, as Eichmann showed in court, it promoted an unawareness of the consequences and effects, fostering an idea that what was being done was not only necessary but a noble duty to humanity (the word “solution” suggests, precisely, a problem being solved). This propaganda strategy was not new, it was based on scientific studies. A decade before, Edward Bernays gives the example of the evacuation hospitals’ reputation during the war in Great Britain. While the buildings were called “hospitals” there was criticism towards the way patients were being treated (Bernays, 1928, p. 51). For the word “hospital” alludes to a place of caring and treatment of people in need. Strikingly, as soon as the name was replaced for the expression “evacuation posts” the criticism stopped (Bernays, 1928, p. 51). The last expression alludes to something completely different. Bernays (1928) adds an important remark:

To persuade the public to discriminate between one type of hospital and another, to dissociate the cliché from the picture it evoked, would have been an impossible task. Instead, a new cliché automatically conditioned the public emotion toward these hospitals (p. 51).

The impact of language on the way we perceive things is a curious and perhaps underestimated factor. The words we use and the words that are presented to us can distort reality in such a way that, for all the above mentioned, can lead people to unconsciously cooperate with what is, behind the scenes, evil and inhumane.

In conclusion, the mechanism of propaganda not only shielded people from reality but also shielded them from the ability to think, to examine whatever information, clichés, empty narratives were shaping their daily lives. They were unaware and absorbed in unreflective patterns of thoughts and habits that shut down reason and, following Kant’s philosophy, shut down the quest for the meaning behind all that was happening. This thoughtlessness becomes clearer if we consider Hannah Arendt’s remark on people’s readiness to revert to their beliefs in the fiction once the movement had ceased (Arendt, 1973). This, indeed, proves how their promptness in accepting those fabricated narratives came from a place of impulse, shallowness, and desperate need for belonging, simplicity, and victory.

3. Conclusion

The rise of the modern age and the consequent victory of science over philosophy limited the ability to think and, they are, in Hannah Arendt’s work, meaningfully linked

with totalitarian regimes, particularly, to Nazi Germany propaganda. Of course, science should not be considered a dogmatic system of beliefs. It is a constant investigation of the physical world through repetitive experimentation, where there is space for more research and modifications of paradigm (Luntley, 1995). However, the victory of applied science over philosophy, a victory of the physical world over the spiritual, can lead to grave consequences.

These issues are ever-present nowadays. Applied science, i.e., technology, is still leading men towards what is believed to be progress. Propaganda, the media, continues to influence people's minds, with the help of scientific discourse, in a world where competition is a threat and propaganda a means to fight. People carry on engaging in behaviours, for which they ignore the motives and, finally, thoughtlessness is still, for most of us, an unconscious condition taking control of our daily lives.

Arendt suggests, in *The Life of the Mind*, "demanding" the exercise of thinking, the ability to tell right from wrong, "from every sane person, no matter how erudite or ignorant, intelligent or stupid, he may happen to be" (Arendt, 1971, p. 13). Jade Larissa Schiff, in her work *Burdens of Political Responsibility*, states that we should practice this inner dialogue in ordinary times, so we gain resilience when hard times arise (Schiff, 2014): periods when fear and anxiety gain control over our impulses and make us susceptible to accept new patterns of thought out of desperation, without any examination or reasonableness.

More importantly, is, perhaps, the connection Arendt found between this inability to think and the practice of evil deeds. Perhaps misery, despair, shallowness or even dullness, and other negative circumstances that perpetuate fear, confusion, or indifference are what make room for dehumanization. Perhaps there are no good or bad people, but merely aware or unaware people. In any case, Hannah Arendt's philosophy is timeless for its urgent importance, raising fundamental questions and promoting a higher awareness in the way we think and act: an indispensable ability to avoid atrocities like those of the past and, also, to prevent, in the future, the meaninglessness of life.

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