

The Human as a Danger to Itself: Murder in the 180th Degree

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Abstract

This article examines Generative Anthropology with respect to its hypothesis that *deferral* is at the foundation of the human and draws out elements of GA as a lived philosophy or “spiritual discipline.” To this end, it examines the centrality of different modes of deferral in the successful treatment of addiction and the rôles of both deferral and resentment in facets of human psychopathology. It uses this preliminary discussion to reopen questions regarding the idea of the human as a “danger to itself,” and to ask whether our conception of intraspecific violence needs to include not merely those harms incurred by humans against others (exogenous), but those that include self-harm (autogenous), which is the leading cause of violent death in the contemporary world. It concludes by asking questions as to the potential relation between these forms of intraspecific violence and calls for further investigation into GA’s “ethics of deferral.”

Keywords: Generative anthropology; suicide; Eric Gans; addiction; mimetic theory; deferral; Alcoholics Anonymous; spirituality; intraspecific violence; resentment

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Pierre Hadot (1922-2010) made a career out of pointing out that the identification of “philosophy” with “philosophical discourse” is a peculiarly modern one. Hadot’s thesis is that philosophers in the ancient schools were engaged with particular ways of living, not in the mere sense that their lives “applied” their philosophies in the way a chef “applies” a recipe, but in the deeper sense that philosophical discourse was connected to a way of living, and gained not just its value but its very *intelligibility* in a way analogous to how phrases in sport only find not merely their application but their very sense in the context of a set of practices, attitudes, and dispositions.[\[1\]](#)

GA is of course a mode of discourse produced by a species whose symbolic forms are in some respects capable of floating free of human action, or at least underdetermined by them.[\[2\]](#) One will not be able to tell a GA person from the way they walk through a room any more than one can identify a “Marxist” by anything other than at some point their beginning a tweet “As a Marxist...” A person’s “worldview” may not be reflected in any particular acts identifiable by a documentary crew.

But it isn't always the case and needn't be the case—and perhaps shouldn't be. GA does however assert the inextricable, ongoing weave of sense and gesture within a species who has, from the outset, been an emergency worker, getting itself into trouble and forever contriving ways to avert it, a history of cataclysms endured and apocalypses deferred.

My contention here is that if the originary scene is what we claim it to be, then it would be extraordinary if deferral's role as the most primal brake on auto-destruction didn't suggest itself as being the basis for a kind of "originary wisdom." When GA proposes that deferral—first of acquisition then of resentment—is the constitutive issue with which humans need to deal, it's strange to me that this construal rarely ventures into the role of deferral with respect to each of us, the effects of which are not only a danger to political order but to spiritual health of the individual.[\[3\]](#)

GA is rightly suspicious of the idea that it—or anyone—can teach us what to desire, but it may I think offer clues about our relationship to it, not *what* to desire but sometimes *how*. What might GA, and the ethics of "deferral" suggest about this and the ambit of resentment? One way of putting this is to ask not how big the originary scene is but how deep. Might GA offer us possibilities for what the Greeks call "care of the soul"?[\[4\]](#)—and why, beyond personal interest, should we bother?

Addiction and Deferral

A deferral is not a *no*, but a *not yet*. An astronaut may abort a mission, but this doesn't entail a *never again*. To abort something can be an act of self-preservation at the most fundamental level, the space into which something new can, and does, emerge.

I want to situate this idea of deferral in a concrete context: drug addiction and alcoholism. The drug addict is stuck in a particular bind or double-imperative: I must have this drug / I cannot have this drug; I cannot live without this fix / I will die if I have it. Outside of a proper experience of addiction, it's hard to make sense of this, or to make sense of it in any way except as a contradiction, embodied irrationality. But it articulates a central tension in addiction-as-experienced: the addictive substance is experienced or lived as both as a poison and as a cure, something that can neither be lived with nor omitted.[\[5\]](#)

In any case, one thing the recovering addict learns early on is to solve the impossible demand of must/can't through deferral, through a logic of can/not now. This logic is implicit in the 12 Step Recovery's canard "One Day at A Time," which is not about never picking up the bottle or drugs, but deferring the self-violence—just for now.

The solution here relies on a sort of indexical shift, like the joke which appears behind a bar in a pub in inner Sydney which announces, "free beer tomorrow." The beer never arrives, of course, but the joke can be enjoyed every day, even by alcoholics.

How does the addict learn to move between the self-destruction of now and the resentment produced by “never”? Through not yet. The now must be inhabited not as a no but as a not yet.

In doing this, the addict learns two things: that desire—as opposed to appetite—is representable, and so capable of being transfigured, named, denaturalised, held before the mind and observed; and that such representations constitute the basis of deferral, modes of delay that will first arrest the addict from destroying themselves, and then slowly allow those representations themselves to shift in particular way.

The danger is that mere delay is an incomplete solution, because what also appears at the moment of deferral is resentment—and the sacralisation—of the desired object, the intoxicant. One cannot defer the addictive act without at the same time sacralising the object, coronating it. What is craving or obsessive attachment except the divinisation of the deferred object?

Parenthetically, one might ask in what sense the addict’s behaviour enacts a kind of historical backflow or reversion in which the big man is displaced and the absent centre returns to the scene, resented for not presenting itself, while retaining a resentment about the subject’s own lack of centrality, configured either on the model of social marginalisation or in terms of the self’s seeming lack of agency, the “addiction.” The drug is sovereign—and one doesn’t have to read Terrence McKenna or even Baudelaire to be convinced that part of the role of the drug in the addict is to mediate cosmos and community.

In any case, the addict must learn something from Judaism—and Derrida: that the only messiah worthy of the title is a messiah to come, that its realisability and figurability means the intoxicant is a false god. Every addict is a pagan in need of iconoclasm.

And so, learning to defer also becomes, as a habit, and as a mode of suffering, one of the means by which the sacred aura of the desired object is eroded, the necessary supplement become redundant, the outgrown toy, the idol, not even vaguely the messiah. The drug is represented, but the delay itself slowly changes that representation. The “yes, but not yet” contains the “yes” in which the prohibition is lessened by a neat semiotic reconfiguration, and the “not yet” allows the addict a way to live that can itself be recoded, daily, in a way that doesn’t include the drug.

We’re probably all familiar with some of the logic here, that the place of certain kinds of deferral (and then re-signification) are not restricted to addiction. Interestingly enough, suicide prevention seems also to be based on triaging a logic of not yet, of simply getting someone to wait.^[6] This is also, according to violence research, true of homicides. Much research indicates the way in which much violent crime—including murder and not just manslaughter—is impulsive.^[7] One means of accounting for the fact of the extraordinary levels of gun-related homicide in the United States is precisely in terms of impulsivity, not

that US citizens are more murderous; if one only has a mango at hand when the desire to kill emerges, the results will tend to be more slapstick than action film.

But, as I say—and we might have wanted to say to Hamlet—more needs to be attended to than mere delay. Resentment itself is a mode of delay, a vengeance that has not had its moment; and so, the way resentment is inhabited, the means of its harbouring, is central. Resentment is not only the scourge of love and creativity, of the “soul that has gone stale,” as Nietzsche says in *The Genealogy of Morals*.^[8] It might be more—must be more—than mere happenstance that the so-called “Big Book” of Alcoholics Anonymous sees in resentment something very unique in relation to the addict:

[W]e searched out the flaws in our make-up which caused our failure. Being convinced that self, manifested in various ways, was what had defeated us, we considered its common manifestations. Resentment is the “number one” offender. It destroys more alcoholics than anything else. From it stem all forms of spiritual disease, for we have been not only mentally and physically ill, we have been spiritually sick. When the spiritual malady is overcome, we straighten out mentally and physically.^[9]

How interesting that this text, which has saved so many lives, including mine and my father’s, places recovery squarely in the context of resentment—and not of others’ resentment, but our own.^[10]

But resentment of what? Or whom? Resentments could be said to be either “external” (directed outwards) or “internal” (directed inwards), although that distinction may itself prove to be too absolute. At a rudimentary level, one form of resentment against the self might be figured as the affective and cognitive disarray wrought by unjust defeat—the self’s powerlessness to act in various ways, ways in which it believes itself required to act. To frame it in terms of Denis Bouvard’s language, we may see ourselves as somehow unfulfilling an imperative we ourselves have demanded without letting that imperative lapse.^[11]

Homo Mortem: Deferral, Resentment, and Murder at 180 Degrees.

Before I proceed, I’m aware that there are a range of possible objections to what I’ve said so far. One of these might be that Generative Anthropology isn’t in the business of “self-help,” or the “care of the self,” however conceived, least of all “rehab.” Further, and perhaps prior to this, it might be contended that when we talk about resentment in GA we are not talking about, or not primarily talking about, or perhaps *shouldn’t* be talking about, an affective state, especially one self-identified.

There are multiple lines of response here. The first of these is simply to ask, “why not?” If GA is a preferred means by which we may theorise the human, of what is proper to it, then we have no way of knowing in advance whether or not the kinds of analyses offered here are

legitimate; so, one reply might be “wait and see!” But I suspect much more can be offered than such a promissory note.

We might take both lines of objection into account by situating what I’ve been saying in relation to human violence *sui generis*. One of the features of the human *qua* human, related to the way it configures its social relations, is the uniqueness of its violence. Where the intraspecific violence of animals is usually a one-on-one affair, human intraspecific violence is non-localised, temporally spread, and can involve legions against legions (or legions against one). (When animals do engage in “pile-ons” of this sort, it’s invariably interspecific. Beta may not bond easily with Alpha, but Beta will not stew on his humiliation and form a militia. For a start, what we call “resentment” requires an internalised scene of representation.)[\[12\]](#)

To say that humans are the biggest threat to their own existence is also to accept that *we are our own worst enemies*. All this much is GA 101.[\[13\]](#) But the implications of this need to be drawn out in all its specificity. It would be ridiculous for the humanist to ignore that human intraspecific violence is unique, but just as foolish to fail to appreciate the *ambit* of that violence.

And this is the point: human violence is not only intraspecific exogenous: it’s intraspecific *autogenous*. The human is, after all, the only animal that kills itself. Outside the province of kin selection, almost all with insects, and whether these can be called “suicides” is contentious, the human is the only truly *suicidal* animal.[\[14\]](#) *Homo sapiens* is also *homo mortem*.

Edwin S. Shneidman, the founder of modern “suicidology,” called it “murder in the 180th degree.”[\[15\]](#) Of course, animals might kill, but only humans murder. Even David Attenborough, with his penchant for anthropomorphic excess, would hesitate to use the phrase “and here we see the owl murdering a turkey.” But humans, unlike animals, *do* murder—others and themselves.[\[16\]](#)

As a human problem, suicide is classified by all measures as the leading cause of violent death in the world, exceeding homicides and war combined by a considerable margin. And the great majority of these are not self-sacrificing deaths, of someone falling down so enemies can get them instead of a friend, of selfless interlopers in real-world trolley problems.[\[17\]](#)

The claim is not a small one and something that should surely make those of us in GA think. Like language and other signal features of the human, suicide has also proved an intractable mystery to evolutionary theorists, for reasons too obvious to state; more than any other phenomenon about which the retrodictive fantasies of evolutionary psychologists can be given full reign, suicide constrains even the most ad hoc Darwinist imagination; the conversation stopper is ultimately that there is little survival value in auto-destruction.

Connections Between Exogeny and Autogeny

So, are there connections between the two kinds of human intraspecific violence, exogenous and autogenous violence? It would be—a priori—extremely strange if there weren't. As it turns out, I think there are. But I can only skate over some of these, partly empirical, corroborations, before returning to thinking about the scene and how we might think about these issues in relation to it.

In research that now spans over 50 years, meta-analyses of the features of suicidality turn up one surprising link: suicidality and resentment.^[18] Suicidal people often have significant amounts of resentment towards people that they are close to, and often comparable amounts of envy and self-loathing. One of the most confronting books about this is David Lester's *The "I" of the Storm*, which contains profoundly confronting and deeply sad diaries kept by people who committed suicide; their attitudes towards friends are ambivalent - gods one day, devils the next. The suicidal person populates their world with frenemies.^[19]

There are differences within suicides, no doubt. Suicide can be a means of living on as pure sign, inhabiting the scene and attaining centrality by means of the most radical form of marginality. Behind the suicide's threat "you'll be sorry when I'm gone," is of course a revenge fantasy. The marginal will be central and will haunt the living for their neglect.

But behind this threat—and we know that many suicides are *not* done with this in mind—is unbearable existential pain, and a sense that this pain has no end while the person is alive. Time crushes them, and no desire can attach itself, no love, to anything that would underwrite living.

In the originary scene, GA identifies the emergence of the passions, primarily resentment—that sentiment predicated on exclusion from centrality—and love, the not-immediately-appetitive attraction to something rendered significant by the sign. Of course, when exclusion from centrality of the object becomes exclusion from the centrality of the social or familial scene, and desire finds nothing to be rendered significant, not even the self, then resentment's energy threatens to collapse inward, with sometimes disastrous consequences.

The individual self is always occupying a mental theatre in which others are agents whose actions become inextricably linked to the actions of that self. The trivial Girardian point is that drug addicts model themselves on other addicts, which is fine enough to state, but solves little, I think, in accounting for addiction's causal dynamics. Even so, the effects of mimetic behaviour can have some chilling implications.

In 2009, a student from the high-achieving Henry M. Gunn High School in Palo Alto left school one afternoon and walked directly onto the train tracks in broad daylight. Three weeks later, another student at the school did exactly the same. Then another student, and

then another. The school—an extremely socially privileged and high-achieving one—was now averaging one suicide per month.

In his major text on suicide from 1897, Durkheim noted the mimetic nature of the phenomenon, those cases where “la contagion est l’unique cause du mal” [contagion is the only source of the evil].[\[20\]](#) He recounts one episode from 1772 where fifteen patients hung themselves from the same hook in the same dark corridor in a hospital, and another where soldiers in a camp in Boulogne mimicked each other in committing suicide at a sentry station.[\[21\]](#) Of course, Durkheim wasn’t the first to note this. Sometimes called the “Werther Effect” after the eponymous protagonist of Goethe’s *Sorrows of Young Werther* of 1774, whose sorrows cause him to hang himself after falling for a married woman, hundreds of mimetic deaths followed. It is believed that Marilyn Monroe’s death in 1962 was “responsible” for 200 additional suicides within the month.[\[22\]](#) And the examples here could be multiplied *ad infinitum*.

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GA is not a psychology, not even a socio-psychology—even less is it a form of self-help. Even so, the kind of reason at work in GA is an invested reason, one whose stake is with the fate of humanity, whose existence spans the personal and social, the inner and the outer, the immanent and the transcendent. And if Eric Gans’s work has real value, and it obviously does, then what is at stake is much more than a complete theoretical model.

Either the idea of the human as the species who is a danger to itself by virtue of the distinctive forms of its intraspecific violence matter to us, are accountable by us, are in some way explicable by us, or they are not. I find it impossible to avoid the conclusion that they should be—and maybe are, or could be, if we were invested enough to think about it.

My sense is that we need to think about this at least before we say that issues like those raised here are beyond the domain of GA. Of course, this essay represents simply one take on what might be called “the ethics of deferral” and its possible implications.[\[23\]](#)

Notes

[\[1\]](#) Pierre Hadot. *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*. Trans. Michael Chase. Oxford: Blackwell, 1995). Hadot’s point—of the connection between language and a “form of life,” and the intelligibility of the former only in the context of the latter—was an issue taken up by Ludwig Wittgenstein. See, for instance, *Philosophical Investigations*. I: 7-23. See also Hadot, “Jeux de langage et philosophie.” *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*. 67.3 (1962): 330-343. Trans. by author forthcoming in *Journal of Continental Philosophy* (2023).

[2] This is a point hammered home, and at great length, by Jacques Derrida, who sees in language a kind of original iterability. See, for instance, *Limited Inc.*

[3] I use the term “health” here and not “wellbeing,” because the latter, such a concept seems to count against spiritual health, insofar as it predicates a kind of metaphysical plenitude which we could project onto others and therefore resent. On the dubious connotations of “wellness” see Norman Swan. *So You Think You Know What’s Good for You?* Sydney: Hachette, 2021. 3-8.

[4] Plato, *Apology*. 30a-b.

[5] There are obvious resonances here to the idea of the φάρμακον [*pharmakon*] in Greek ritual, from which we derive the English word “pharmacology” and whose ambiguities are irresolvable. See, for instance, Bernard Steigler, “Distrust and the Pharmacology of Transformational Technologies.” In TB Zülsdorf TB et. al. *Quantum Entanglements: Social Reflections of Nanoscience and Emerging Technologies*. IOS Press, 2011. 28-39, and Jacques Derrida, (1981), “Plato’s Pharmacy” In: *Dissemination*, translated by Barbara Johnson, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1981. 63-171.

[6] The links between suicidality and impulsivity have long been studied. See, for instance, Brent DA, Melhem N. Familial transmission of suicidal behavior. *Psychiatr Clin North Am.* 2008; 31:157-177; Diaconu G, Turecki G. Family history of suicidal behavior predicts impulsive-aggressive behavior levels in psychiatric outpatients. *J Affect Disord.* 2009;113:172-178; Chachamovich E, Stefanello S, Botega N, Turecki G. Which are the recent clinical findings regarding the association between depression and suicide? *Rev Bras Psiquiatr.* 2009; 31 Suppl 1: S18-S25

[7] Barratt ES, Patton JH. “Impulsivity: cognitive, behavioral, and psychophysiological correlates.” In Zuckerman M, ed. *Biological Basis of Sensation-Seeking, Impulsivity and Anxiety*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum; 1983: 77-116; Sean Kaliski. “Impulse control, impulsivity, and violence: Clinical implications.” *Psychiatric Times*. (August 2015). <https://www.psychiatrictimes.com/view/the-benefits-of-longitudinal-evaluations-in-parental-alienation-cases>; Richard C. Howard, “Psychopathy, Impulsiveness, and Violence: How are they Linked? *Journal of Behavior.* 2.1 (2017): 1004; Irina Komarovskaya, Ann Booker Loper and Janet Warren. “The Role of Impulsivity in Antisocial and Violent Behaviour and Personality Disorders Among Incarcerated Women. *Criminal Justice and Behavior.* 34.11. (November 2007): 1499-1515. That impulsivity is also linked to suicidality is also well-established.

[8] Friedrich Nietzsche. *The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals*. Trans. Francis Golffing. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956. 172.

[9] *Alcoholics Anonymous*. 4th Edition. New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services,

2001. 64.

[10] This is no place to debate the “scientific” efficacy of 12 Step Programs, which has been the source of ongoing controversy. To date, the longest study on the efficacy of addiction treatment programs was the NIH’s ProjectMATCH. See:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20071029204522/http://www.niaaa.nih.gov/NewsEvents/NewsReleases/match.htm>

[11] Denis Bouvard. “Resentment.” <https://dennisbouvard.substack.com/p/resentment> [accessed 3/8/2022]

[12] It’s important to note that resentment appears, at least in part, by diagnosing it in others, even displacing it *onto* others, which means that it is not simply a problem external to ourselves, but an existential threat, which captures both political and personal issues, and maybe bridges them.

[13] “A Brief Introduction to Generative Anthropology.” <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/gaintro/>. This fundamental points is covered in a number of places. See, for instance, Eric Gans. *Originary Thinking: Elements of Generative Anthropology* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1993). 2-3.

[14] Comai, S., & Gobbi, G. (2016). Translational research in suicide: Is it possible to study suicide in animal models? In P. Courtet (Ed.), *Understanding suicide: From diagnosis to personalized treatment* (pp. 177-188). Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing; Maltsberger, J. T. (2003). Can a louse commit suicide? *Crisis*, 24(4), 175-176; Preti, A. (2005). Suicide among animals: Clues from folklore that may prevent suicidal behaviour in human beings. *Psychological Reports*, 97(2), 547-558; Soper, C.A. *The Evolution of Suicide*. Springer, 2018.

[15] Suicide used to be designated in English common law as *felo de se*—self-felony—and it’s apt. Our word “suicide” (which is the same as the French and very close to the Spanish and Italian, all having the same derivation) comes from the Latin—*sui*—self / *caedes*—murder or assassination. Modern German calls it *Selbstmord* [Self murder].

[16] Of course, we know about suicidal lemmings—except they aren’t. The cultural image of lemmings as animals that kill themselves began with a Disney documentary of 1958 called *White Wilderness*. There is no evidence, as it turns out, that lemmings are suicidal. (As the CBC uncovered in the early 1980s revealed, the said footage was faked.)

[17] Humphrey, Nicholas. “The Lure of Death: Suicide and Human Evolution.” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B*. 373. 16th July, 2018. 1-7.

<https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/10.1098/rstb.2017.0269>

[18] Brezo J, Paris J, Turecki G. "Personality traits as correlates of suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, and suicide completions: a systematic review." *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica*. 113 (2006): 180-206; David Lester, "Resentment and dependency in the suicidal individual." *Journal of General Psychology*. 1969. 81: 137-145; Lester. *The "I" of the Storm: Understanding the Suicidal Mind*. DeGruyter, 2014.

[19] David Lester. *The "I" of the Storm: Understanding the Suicidal Mind*. DeGruyter, 2014. See esp. 25-7.

[20] Émile Durkheim. *Le Suicide*. Félix Alcan, 1897. 74.

[21] "Dans les épidémies dont il sera reparlé plus loin, il arrive presque toujours que les différents suicides se ressemblent avec la plus étonnante uniformité. On dirait qu'ils sont la copie les uns des autres. Tout le monde connaît l'histoire de ces quinze invalides qui, en 1772, se pendirent successivement et en peu de temps à un même crochet, sous un passage obscur de l'hôtel. Le crochet enlevé, l'épidémie prit fin. De même au camp de Boulogne, un soldat se fait sauter la cervelle clans une guérite; en peu de jours, il a des imitateurs dans la même guérite; mais, dès que celle-ci fut brûlée, la contagion s'arrêta. Dans tous ces faits, l'influence prépondérante de l'obsession est évidente puisqu'ils cessent aussitôt qu'a disparu l'objet matériel qui en évoquait l'idée. Quand donc des suicides, manifestement issus les uns des autres, semblent tous reproduire un même modèle, il est légitime de les attribuer à cette même cause, d'autant plus qu'elle doit avoir son maximum d'action dans ces familles où tout concourt à en accroître la puissance." Émile Durkheim. *Le Suicide*. 74-5.

[22] Humphrey, Nicholas. "The Lure of Death: Suicide and Human Evolution." 4-5.

[23] There may be much gained, for instance, in examining Sören Kierkegaard's contention that "immediacy" must be "surmounted"—the reorientation of the human away from the subject's absolute relation to relative goods—in his outline of genuine human subjectivity in Part II of Volume I of his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992). 361-616. Esp. 364-366, 481-2, and 525-6. (See also 235-7 and 327-330.) Or we may examine the psychology of "delayed gratification"—see Renée M. Tobin, William G. Graziano, "Delay of gratification: a review of fifty years of regulation research," in Rick H. Hoyle (ed.), *Handbook of Personality and Self-Regulation* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley, 2009) 47-63. Suggestive also—albeit once again in a very different direction—is Norbert Elias' thesis on the role of deferral in civilisational development. See, for instance, Elias, *On the Process of Civilisation* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2012). 128-131, 406-9, 446-9.