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Bargaining with Eternity and Numbering One's Days

Medicine, Nietzsche, and Doctor Strange

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From the standpoint of modern medicine, death is a failure—and one of the first things that we learn in the 2016 movie *Doctor Strange* is that Stephen Strange does not like to fail. In fact, at the time of the automobile accident that brought his brilliant career as a neurosurgeon to a tragic end, Stephen Strange and failure had apparently never yet crossed paths. He had a "perfect record," as he casually reminded Nurse Billy in an offhand boast when Billy proposed that he help a "68-year-old female with an advanced brain stem glioma." Such a diagnosis predicted a poor outcome that he would prefer not to have sully his résumé. At the same time, though, he doesn't want to build his reputation on easy victories. He declines to help "a 35-year-old Air Force colonel who crushed his spine in some sort of experimental armor," dismissing it as the surgical equivalent of child's play: "I could help but so can fifty other people."[1]

So it's no surprise that after Stephen's catastrophic accident that crushes his hands, his world collapses. Physical therapy alone can never restore his hands to what they were before and—ironically, in light of his own practice of rejecting patients who might ruin his perfect record—another doctor rejects him as a candidate for a cutting-edge experimental treatment lest it fail and ruin the doctor's reputation. Stephen's entire professional life, outside of which he seems to have little else, has been about undoing damage and defying death. His own research has focused on the stimulation of neurogenesis in the

Doctor Strange and Philosophy: The Other Book of Forbidden Knowledge,
First Edition. Edited by Mark D. White.
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central nervous system, restoring damaged neural tissue through a process that promises to save thousands of lives. His experience in the operating room is one of snatching patients from the jaws of death or, in at least one instance, restoring to life a patient who had already been declared brain dead. If death is failure for Stephen, the converse is also true after his accident—the failure to restore his hands is tantamount to death, the end of the only life that holds any meaning for him.

Heading East

"This isn't the end. There are other things that can give your life meaning," his friend and colleague Christine Palmer urges. "Like what? Like you?" he snaps backs. Christine tries to shake Stephen of his obsession with reversing the irreversible and get him to accept that "some things just can't be fixed." But because he's unable to envision a new life for himself, he clings to the unrecoverable past with mounting desperation and anger. That desperation finally drives him to Nepal, high in the Himalayas, in search of a miracle, to Kamar-Taj, where he becomes a student of the Ancient One. Though he hopes to learn the secret to restoring what was lost, he instead learns to surrender his attachment to the past and embrace transformation and mortality. As it turns out, that was the very same lesson that Christina was trying to teach him, but maybe Stephen first needed to travel to the other side of the world, to the exotic East, to sink to the absolute nadir of desperation, and then encounter that same truth wrapped in saffron robes before he could truly hear it.

Since at least the nineteenth century, it has become something of a cliché to view the East—the Indian subcontinent, the Himalayan regions, and the Far East in particular—as the repository of wisdom and spirituality, while the West has been depicted as an abode of soulless materialism where an ever-increasing store of scientific knowledge is coupled with a paucity of wisdom about how to use it well. Stephen Strange in many ways epitomizes the unflattering picture that these stereotypes paint of a spiritually desolate West. He's a vain egoist engaged in a self-defeating attempt to control every facet of his world, a believer only in what's given to his senses, trusting only in reason and science and living like an existential orphan in a universe that's barren of any meaning or purpose except what we impose on it. "We are made of matter and nothing more," he lectures the Ancient

One, reciting the creed of scientific materialism. "You're just another tiny, momentary speck within an indifferent universe."

Obviously, not every resident of Western civilization shares this worldview, which is at once bleak in its assessment of our existential plight and madly optimistic in its faith in our ability to bend this particular corner of our indifferent universe to our will through science, technology, and medicine. Still, it does represent an attitude that is at least native to the West, one that often claims as its warrant the tremendous power over nature that it has allowed us to achieve. We witness the bounty of this power in the early scenes of the movie that take place in the hospital, where Stephen deploys the most advanced medical technology, knowledge, and skill in the service of saving lives. Yet when he begins his training at Kamar-Taj, the Ancient One admonishes him, "Your intellect has taken you far in life but it will take you no further," following that up with an instruction to "silence your ego." If the West is hyper-rationalist and obsessed with subduing the forces of nature, the East of popular imagination is where one goes to gain the wisdom that begins with surrendering control and accepting the limits of reason.

Kamar-Taj is a Westerner's dream of exotic Asian culture, an Orientalist pastiche of incongruous elements from diverse traditions that variously evoke an idea of the mystical, spiritually enlightened East. The Ancient One, who is not a Buddhist, wears the saffron robe of a Buddhist monk and shows Stephen a book containing diagrams of both Indian chakras (tantric centers of spiritual energy) and Chinese acupuncture points. Denizens of Kamar-Taj wear Japanese-inspired clothing and engage in martial arts training, while the Ancient One mouths various mystical-sounding clichés with sage-like solemnity ("At the root of existence, mind and matter meet; thoughts shape reality"). The Ancient One is obviously not of Asian heritage herself, however—we're told that she's Celtic, which vaguely associates her with a certain New Age image of occult wisdom and intimacy with nature drawn from the pre-Christian West. In the popular imagination, the Celts represent something like a remote outpoint of Eastern wisdom in the West, one that is long gone, trampled under by the advance of Christianity. But what this imaginary, hybrid, trope-laden Asian landscape signifies is not so much the reality of Asian civilizations, but rather a sense that, despite the manifold successes of Western science and technology, something vital has been lost along the way, something that this fantasy imagines still exists elsewhere. As Stephen tells Christine upon his return, "After Western medicine failed me, I headed East."

"Matter and Nothing More"

Stephen speaks of Western medicine, but it might be more accurate to refer to modern medicine, since the kind of medical practice in which Stephen was engaged is bound up with a set of ideas and aspirations regarding humanity's place in nature that emerged only in the seventeenth century in tandem with the scientific revolution. Among the intellectual guiding lights of this revolution were two great philosophers: Francis Bacon (1561–1626) and René Descartes (1596–1650). Because Bacon came first, the project that he and Descartes initiated is often referred to as the Baconian project.

This project, which came to shape Western civilization and then in due course the emerging civilization of global modernity, was guided by the imperative to reduce human suffering—"to subdue and overcome the necessities and miseries of humanity," as Bacon put it—and to expand the realm of human freedom through the technological conquest of nature.[2] Descartes was even more blunt about the aims of this project: the new technology enabled by a proper science of the natural world promised to make us "the masters and possessors of nature," which was

> desirable not only for the invention of an infinity of devices that would enable us to enjoy trouble-free the fruits of the Earth and all the goods found there, but also principally for the maintenance of health, which is the first good and the foundation of all the other goods in this life.[3]

Consequently, for Descartes, the indefinite lengthening of human life was to be the crowning achievement of modern science. "The preservation of health has always been the principal end of my studies," he wrote.[4] Whereas the goal of pre-modern medicine was to care for the sick and the dying, in full awareness that not every ailment could be cured and that death was inevitable, within the context of the Baconian project, any limitation on human powers is an insult to our autonomy, a challenge to be overcome, and a summons for us to reclaim control of our existence. For Descartes, as for Doctor Stephen Strange, death is an enemy to be subdued.[5]

It's more than a little ironic, then, that, as contemporary philosopher (and physician) Jeffrey Bishop points out, the human body as conceived within the Baconian project is essentially a dead body, as opposed to the living, suffering, fully animated body of someone with a particular identity, history, hopes, fears, and loved ones.[6] It's not just

that, for most medical students learning the techniques of surgery, "their first patient is dead [a cadaver], literally patient beneath the dissecting knife."[7] Rather, it's that the body is approached as a machine, albeit one of dazzling intricacy, to be studied, manipulated, and repaired in ways that are analogous to how a mechanic fixes an inanimate contraption that is broken. Stephen's belief that we are matter and nothing more simply reflects the way medicine approaches the human body.

The anesthetized body on Stephen's operating table at Metro-General Hospital is for all practical purposes indistinguishable from a corpse. Indeed, it would have been treated no differently than a corpse, its organs harvested while the heart was still beating, if Stephen had not overruled the treating physician's misdiagnosis of brain death. Hospitals are places of efficient operations and high tech instruments, where bodies are objects whose inner workings are skillfully manipulated to produce the desired effects. It is no accident that the medical art turns living bodies into passive objects, since otherwise it would be impossible to make reliable predictions about them and gain some measure of control over their machinery. As Bishop observes, "Life is in flux, and it is difficult to make truth claims about matter in motion, about bodies in flux. Thus, life is no foundation upon which to build a true science of medicine."[8]

Looking Beyond Death

Of course, to say that doctors relate to their patients' bodies as machines to be repaired, rather than as the bodies of living beings, doesn't mean that doctors don't care for their patients. Christine Palmer obviously cares a great deal about her patients in the Metro-General emergency room. And in a certain way the exclusive focus on the machinery of the body to the neglect of the "whole person" makes medicine a highly ethical discipline, strictly impartial and fundamentally egalitarian. Unlike Stephen, Christine doesn't believe it's beneath her to come into work just to save the life of a "drunk idiot with a gun" or "another dreg of humanity," as Stephen describes her patients. The mission of a doctor is to save lives, not to make judgments about the worth of those lives, a restricted mission that coincides with the doctor's restricted sphere of competence. Doctors can keep our bodies alive, often for a very long time, but they can't tell us what our lives are good for and, consequently, they can't tell us when it would be

best to gracefully—and gratefully—let go of life. The goal is no longer living out a natural lifespan, whatever that could mean once the Baconian project has persuaded us that natural limits are given to us only to be surpassed, but simply more and more life—like the Ancient One stealing centuries of life from the Dark Dimension until she's finally defeated by an external power. For modern medicine, too, death is always a defeat, a failure to deliver on its implicit promise of a cure.

And that's one of the problems with the Baconian project. When the paramount passion of our civilization becomes the conquest of nature, it's hard to imagine on what basis we could assign any non-arbitrary limits to that conquest. So our expectations of medicine, as well as our expectations of human power and ingenuity more generally, grow to be increasingly immodest. Any limitation of our powers becomes an affront, an intolerable absurdity in a universe that should be made to bend to our will, which is precisely how Stephen experiences the news that even the most advanced medicine can't undo the damage done to his hands. Such news is world-shattering for him—and not just in the sense that it marks the end of the life he had made for himself as an acclaimed surgeon at the pinnacle of success in his field. It also represents a crisis in his Baconian worldview, its shipwreck on the shoals of harsh, unalterable reality.

The Ancient One chides Stephen for his "overinflated ego," discerning that he wants "to go back to the delusion that you can control anything, even death, which no one can control. Not even the great doctor Stephen Strange." Though apparently referring to Stephen's peculiar personal shortcomings, her words are really an indictment of the entire Baconian project that had captured his imagination—and that of the modern West—and shaped his view of the world before failing him and leading him to the brink of despair. And whether Stephen fully realizes it or not, recoiling from the failure of that project was what his journey to the East was really all about.

"The World Is Not What It Ought to Be"

We don't need to head east in order to find a critique of the aspirations of the modern West. The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) believed that the goal of the Baconian project to overcome "the necessities and miseries of mankind," its twofold ambition of eliminating suffering and forestalling death, sought objects that were neither possible

nor desirable. Nietzsche had harsh words for those who wanted to abolish suffering, since he believed that only by passing through adversity and enduring life's brutal necessities was it possible for human beings to make something worthwhile of themselves.

Nietzsche himself was intimately acquainted with suffering. He was afflicted with chronic bad health, digestive problems, poor eyesight, and crippling migraine headaches, all of which made his life in many ways one of constant torment. These physical infirmities forced him into early retirement from his initial profession as a professor of classical studies at the University of Basel in Switzerland, which gives him something in common with Stephen Strange, whose illustrious career in medicine was also cut short by physical disability. But unlike Stephen, Nietzsche did not rage against his fate as though it were some terrible injustice for which the universe must be held accountable. Recovering from one of his many protracted bouts of illness, he wrote:

> I want to learn more and more to see what is necessary in things as what is beautiful in them—thus I shall be one of those who make things beautiful. *Amor fati* [love of fate]: let that be my love from now on! I do not want to wage war against what is ugly. I do not want to accuse; I do not even want to accuse the accusers! Let *looking away* be my only negation. And, all in all and on the whole: some day I want only to be a Yes-sayer![9]

For Nietzsche, the challenge is not to remake the world to our liking, but rather to learn to love the world as it is, which includes affirming both our capacity to suffer and the unalterable fact of our mortality.

According to Nietzsche, becoming this sort of Yes-sayer meant standing against the dominant traditions of Western religion and philosophy, both of which he believed were motivated by a subterranean animus against the conditions of life as we know it, its suffering, hardship, and finitude—or, as we say today, the fact that life's a bitch and then you die. It was in order to make life more tolerable that human beings constructed the fantasy of another, better world beyond this one, a changeless metaphysical realm immune from the flux of time, a heaven where all our wounds are healed and our tears wiped away. He calls the fabricators of these phantom worlds the "hinterworldly"—in German, *Hinterweltler*, literally "believers in a world behind the world"—and says, "It was suffering and incapacity that created all hinterworlds."[10]

The sorcerer Kaecilius, rogue disciple and nemesis of the Ancient One, also aspires to "a world beyond time, beyond death," where mortal beings can enjoy "eternal life as part of the one." However, unlike the fabrications of Nietzsche's *Hinterweltler*, the timeless realm of Dormammu that Kaecilius wants to bring to Earth is (at least within the Marvel Cinematic Universe) horribly real. Although Nietzsche is no believer in worlds beyond time, he would almost certainly have applauded the movie's depiction of Dormammu, the lord of the eternal realm, as a ravenous, beady-eyed monster whose promise of "eternal life" masks the fact that everything about his realm is the antithesis of life. His arrival on Earth arrests the flow of time and turns the living into lifeless effigies of themselves. Nietzsche would undoubtedly say that the movie's depiction of Dormammu and the nightmarish consequences of inviting him into this world reveal the hope for eternity to be grounded in a hatred of life. Kaecilius really should have read to the end of the book ("the warnings come after the spells")—or at least read Nietzsche, whose writings are also full of warnings about the dangers of putting our faith in hinterworlds.

Whither the Hinterworlds?

In the modern world, however, with the advance of scientific materialism—typified by saying that "we are matter and nothing more"—belief in these hinterworlds has become harder and harder to sustain. That does not mean that the antipathy toward life that motivated human beings to construct them has vanished, though. It is simply taken the form of the Baconian project to vanquish suffering in *this* world, since, being merely "tiny, momentary specks within an indifferent universe," we no longer have the consolation of belief in another world to help make our suffering bearable.

Those, of course, were Stephen's words to the Ancient One, describing what he takes to be our forlorn existential status. Surprisingly, he later hears those same words spoken to him by Kaecilius. This verbal coincidence suggests that there may be significant overlap in the worldviews of these two ostensible opponents—or at least between the views of Kaecilius and the Stephen Strange who first showed up at Kamar-Taj, bitter at how fate had treated him and desperate to regain the control he had lost. At that time, the Ancient One expressed concern over his "stubbornness, arrogance, ambition,"

prompting Mordo to say that Strange reminded her of Kaecilius. Mordo hinted further that Kaecilius' downfall, which could become Stephen's as well, resulted from their seeking "power" in order to defeat their "enemies" rather than for the purpose of using it, as Mordo says he had, to defeat their "demons." Nietzsche helps us to see that, for both Kaecilius the *Hinterwelter* and callow Stephen Strange, the Baconian foot soldier, the enemies and the demons are the same.

Their common enemy is time and their shared demon is what Nietzsche calls the spirit of revenge against time. "The world is not what it ought to be," declares Kaecilius. "Humanity longs for the eternal, for a world beyond time because time is what enslaves us. Time is an insult. Death is an insult." Time brings suffering due to the impermanence of all the things we cherish, while our inescapable advance toward our ultimate destination in the grave promises to deprive us of what we cherish most, our lives. "Time kills everything," bemoans Kaecilius. The passing away of our lives and the lives of our loved ones, the flux and fluidity of all things, the irreversibility of time with the irretrievable loss it brings—these are sources of our pain and distress.

Stephen may not share Kaecilius' hinterworldly ambition to transcend time altogether—Stephen is a Baconian, after all, intent on controlling this world, not escaping it—but he does suffer the passage of time as an insult, clinging desperately to an unrecoverable past in a quixotic hope to reverse what time has done to him. The anguish that leads him to sell everything he owns and finally to journey halfway around the world to Kamar-Taj is nothing other than his refusal to come to terms with the death of his old life. Both men are, in Nietzsche's words, sick with "revenge" against time. His description of the vengeful human will fits the demon that torments Stephen especially well: "Impotent against that which has been—it is an angry spectator of everything past."[11] The spirit of revenge, "the will's unwillingness toward time and time's 'it was,'" must be overcome if we are to embrace the *amor fati*, the love of fate, that Nietzsche believes is indispensable for living joyfully in the world.[12]

"Pain Is an Old Friend"

Attempting to arrest the flow of time and its unceasing process of transformation is futile, according to Nietzsche, but that is no reason to rage against our mortality or to succumb to otiose fantasies about

sloughing off our mortal coil and ascending to a higher form of existence that is not susceptible to death and decay. Change, even the ultimate change we call death, is something we must affirm as part of the natural ebb and flow of existence. Impermanence is a feature, not a bug, of human existence, as can be seen when we look at the so-called salvation brought by Dormammu, an existence that is lifeless and frozen.

For Nietzsche, the antidote to the poisonous spirit of revenge against time is what he called the affirmation of "eternal return," an idea that he first introduced as a thought experiment in the same work in which he declared his allegiance to *amor fati*:

> What, if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: "This life as you now live it and have lived it you will have to live again and innumerable times again …" Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: "You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine." … Or how well disposed you would have to become to yourself *to long for nothing more fervently* than this eternal confirmation and seal?[13]

To become so well disposed to existence that you would be willing to live this self-same life, with all of its pain and suffering, its disappointments and loss, its inevitable decline and inescapable demise, over and over again for all eternity—that is, according to Nietzsche, the ultimate formula for *amor fati* and the overcoming of revenge. But for those for whom our frail and mortal existence is simply not good enough, "not what it ought to be," the prospect of living forever in this eternal "time loop" would be absolutely intolerable.

Because Nietzsche believes that this thought of eternal return will be a tonic to some but toxic to others, he thought of it as a weapon that could be used defeat those who, like Kaecilius but also like Stephen at the beginning of his journey, were rebelling against the conditions of our mortal existence. There's no reason to suppose that Stephen ever read Nietzsche—after all, if he had, he might have been able to reconcile himself to his loss of his medical career without having to sell everything he owned to seek answers in the East. But he did learn something about "time loops" at Kamar-Taj and was astute enough to figure out on his own how to weaponize them against Dormammu himself, the very apotheosis of enmity toward transient existence.

Ascending to the Dark Dimension, Stephen took his stand on the surface of a giant sphere, announcing, "Dormammu, I've come to bargain." In response, Dormammu entered the negotiations with a predictable overture—he disintegrated Stephen with a blast of energy. But like Nietzsche's eternal return, this self-same scene began replaying itself over and over, with Stephen restored to confront Dormammu once again, only to suffer yet another death at the hand of the enraged god. Stephen explains to an angry and confused Dormammu exactly what he's doing:

STEPHEN:	Just as you gave Kaecilius powers from your dimension, I've brought a little power from mine. This is time. An endless looped time … This is how things are now. You and me, trapped in this moment, endlessly.
DORMAMMU:	Then you will spend eternity dying.
STEPHEN:	Yes, but everyone on Earth will live.
DORMAMMU:	But you will suffer.
STEPHEN:	Pain's an old friend.
DORMAMMU:	You will never win.
STEPHEN:	No, but I can lose again and again and again and again forever.

Dormammu finally has no choice but to discontinue his assault on the Earth and abandon his plan to ensnare humanity in an eternal prison of lifeless stupor. It's unclear whether Dormammu has teeth, but, if he does, we can certainly imagine him gnashing them like the first individual in Nietzsche's thought experiment, as horrified at being imprisoned in time as we might be at being locked forever in the Dark Dimension.

A Strange Realization

Even more striking is what this exchange tells us about the transformation that Stephen has undergone since the beginning of his journey. The proud doctor for whom death is always a failure—and who *really* hated to fail—is now willing to embrace suffering, death, and endlessly repeated failure in order to fulfill his new role as a sorcerer tasked with protecting his world from mystical threats. More than simply surrendering his impotent rage against the past and futile efforts to reverse it, he now looks back on what he has suffered with gratitude, as an "old friend." And as we noted earlier, a good friend is a good teacher.

Still, even recognizing that death is an inevitable part of life and that life is given to us only on condition that we consent to give it back when the days allotted to us have run their course, to be fully alive is to love our lives and to be reluctant to let them go. In the last moments of her life, the Ancient One confesses to Stephen, "I'm not ready. No one ever is. We don't get to choose our time." Yet, she adds, "Death is what gives life meaning. To know your days are numbered, your time is short." The necessity of death adds to the preciousness of our existence, giving weight and urgency to our choices. Death isn't an "insult." It's the reason we care so deeply about life.

Notes

1. All quoted dialogue is from the 2016 film *Doctor Strange*.
2. Francis Bacon, *The Philosophical Works of Francis Bacon* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 251.
3. René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, 4th ed., trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1999), 35. These two goals, relief from the pain of labor and the conquest of death, amount to an attempt to overcome two of the curses the biblical God placed on humanity when he expelled Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:17–19).
4. René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vol. III: *The Correspondence*, trans. Anthony Kenny (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 275.
5. For a further discussion of the Baconian project that situates it within the context of medical ethics, see Gerald McKinney, *To Relieve the Human Condition: Bioethics, Technology, and the Body* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1997), 25–38.
6. Jeffrey Bishop, *The Anticipatory Corpse: Medicine, Power, and the Care of the Dying* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), 14–23.
7. Ibid., 14.
8. Ibid., 21.
9. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff and Adrian Del Caro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 276 (Section IV.276).
10. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, trans. Adrian Del Caro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 21 (Section I.3: "On the Hinterworldly").
11. Ibid., 111 (Section II.20, "On Redemption").
12. Ibid.
13. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 194 (Section IV.341).