

# Dealing with the absurdity of human existence in the face of converging catastrophes

May 2 2019, by Lonnie Aarssen

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Homo sapiens means wise human, but the name [no longer suits us](#). As an evolutionary biologist who writes about Darwinian interpretations of human motivations and cultures, I propose that at some point we became what we are today: [Homo absurdus](#), a human that spends its whole life

trying to convince itself that its existence is not absurd.

As French philosopher [Albert Camus](#) put it: "Man is the only creature who refuses to be what he is." Thanks to this entrenched absurdity, the 21st century is riding on a runaway train of converging catastrophes in [the Anthropocene](#).

## Discovery of self

The critical juncture in the lineage toward Homo absurdus was described by evolutionist [Theodosius Dobzhansky](#): "A being who knows that he will die arose from ancestors who did not know." But evolution at some point also built into this [human mind](#) a deeply ingrained sentiment—that one has not just a material life (the physical body), but also a distinct and separate mental life (the inner self).

Human self-awareness led to the evolution of [cognitive skills](#) that were game-changers for gene transmission success. In our degree of endowment for these skills, [our ancestors had the edge over all other hominids](#).

But the trade-off for this was [self-impermanence anxiety](#)—a recurrent fear that, in bringing eventual material death, time inevitably also annihilates all that one has done and all that one has been, and that soon it will be as though one had never existed at all.

## Buffering for a troubled mind

However, [natural selection](#) also gave our ancestors primal impulses that served to buffer the worry of self-impermanence. These involve two novel and uniquely human [fundamental drives](#): escape from self and extension of self.

Both are reflected in a prescient passage from the great Russian author, [Leo Tolstoy](#):

"For man to be able to live he must either not see the infinite, or have such an explanation of the meaning of life as will connect the finite with the infinite."

Extension of self —"connecting the finite with the infinite" —involves what I call [legacy drive](#): the desire to leave something appreciable behind that will endure beyond mortal existence.

Delusions of symbolic immortality involve three principal domains:

- Parenthood: Shaping the minds of offspring to mirror the defining characteristics of one's own selfhood (i.e. values, beliefs, attitudes, conscience, ego, skills, virtues, etc.)
- [Accomplishment](#): Earning recognition, status, or fame through talents or deeds that evoke admiration, trust, respect, or astonishment from others
- Identifying with or belonging to something larger-than-self: Membership or belief in a particular cultural world view, one based, for example, on concepts like patriotism, political ideology or religiosity/spiritualism

## Escape from self

For those less driven to produce a legacy, there is escape from self —Tolstoy's "not seeing the infinite." Most commonly, this is achieved through distractions, deployed through what I call [leisure drive](#), an intrinsic disposition to be easily drawn to indulgence in opportunities for enjoyment.

Typically, these involve motivations that hack into the brain's pleasure

modules and have deep evolutionary roots associated with meeting core needs (e.g. survival, social affiliation, mating, endearment, kinship) that rewarded ancestral gene transmission success.

Modern domains of leisure drive are manifested in many cultural norms and products designed to trigger these pleasure modules—like toys, stories, games, aesthetics, social entertainment, [consumerism](#), humour, recreational sex, yoga, meditation, inebriation and psychedelics.

The essential consequence of these distractions lies in arresting the mind firmly in the immediate present, thus temporarily but effectively shielding it from the dread of "the infinite," wherein the self ceases to be.

For some, placing the mind firmly in the present may be accomplished by simply keeping busy with purposeful toil or mundane routine. As American philosopher [Eric Hoffer](#) put it: "A busy life is the nearest thing to a purposeful life."

## **Work hard, play hard**

The delusions of legacy drive and the distractions of leisure drive both help to mitigate the worry of self-impermanence. [Strong selection for these drives](#) thus propelled copies of our ancestors' genes into future generations.

But self-impermanence anxiety has always lurked stubbornly beneath the surface, repeatedly demanding more and better delusions and distractions. And so, from a long history of striving for an untroubled mind, the effects of natural selection ramped up in momentum, I suggest, like a runaway train.

These drives to work hard and play even harder have fuelled the frenzied

and relentless march of progress that we call civilization. With this, our cultural evolution has generated a large menu of available delusions for chasing after legacy, and distractions for chasing after leisure. And this has given us a world of environmental catastrophes that are [annihilating other species and their habitats](#) at an unprecedented rate.

Sustained genetic selection for legacy and leisure drives then has generated two dire consequences for humanity: A civilization now moving ever faster toward [collapse on a global scale](#), and an evolved psychology that is now breeding an escalation of human despair—[anxiety disorders](#), [depression](#) and [suicide](#).

In other words, the growing demands of these drives (resulting from biological evolution) are starting to exceed the supply rate of available domains (generated by cultural evolution) for satisfying them. It becomes harder and harder, therefore, to meet an ever-increasing need for distractions and delusions, including those needed to buffer the mounting "[eco-anxiety](#)" from living in a collapsing civilization.

## **Living with Homo absurdus**

How can we manage our human predicament, now that we are Homo absurdus?

I have suggested that a new model for cultural evolution might come to our rescue involving a kind of [biosocial management](#), based on facilitating and implementing a deeper and more broadly public understanding of, and empathy for, the evolutionary roots of human motivations, especially those associated with our responses to self-impermanence anxiety.

We must learn how to successfully regulate our frenetic drive to convince ourselves that our existence is not absurd. And this requires

that we at least understand how we came to be so driven.

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