

RATIONAL MAGIC



Tara Isabella Burton journeys into techland
to discover why a culture once obsessed
with reason is now going *woo*

“It broke open a shell in my heart,” the young man I’ll call Vogel said of reading Nietzsche’s *Human, All Too Human* when we met for an interview earlier this year at a Brooklyn bar. “I was very, very depressed at that time....Beauty in the world had become hauntingly distant. It existed over the horizon behind some mountain and I couldn’t access it.”

Vogel wears the owl of Minerva around his neck. It’s a reference to the pursuit of wisdom, but the charm also evokes Hegel’s maxim “The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk”—the idea that true insight only comes late, at the end of an era. His bracelets, too, are symbolic: they represent Huginn and Muninn, who in Norse mythology are the two ravens who sit on the shoulders of the god Odin, and whose names mean *thought* and *memory*.

Vogel is part of a loose online subculture known as the *postrationalists*—also known by the jokey endonym “this part of Twitter,” or TPOT. They are a group of writers, thinkers, readers, and Internet trolls alike who were once rationalists, or members of adjacent communities like the effective altruism movement, but grew disillusioned. To them, rationality culture’s technocratic focus on ameliorating the human condition through hyper-utilitarian goals—increasing the number of malaria nets in the developing world, say, or minimizing the existential risk posed by the development of unfriendly artificial intelligence—had come at the expense of taking seriously the less quantifiable elements of a well-lived human life.

On Twitter, Vogel calls himself Prince Vogelfrei and tweets a combination of subcultural in-jokes, deeply earnest meditations on the nature of spiritual reality, and ambiguous amalgamations of the two (example: “get over all social fomo by contemplating the inaccessible experience of all history and prehistory, the primordial love stories of rodent-like ancestors”). Vogelfrei in German means *outlawed* but is literally *free as a bird*—not a bad thing to be, on the often intellectually siloed *birdsie*. It’s also a reference to a series of poems by Nietzsche sung by a prince who, imitating birds, sets himself spiritually free.

Vogel’s pursuit of truth had hardly been painless. Raised a pastor’s son and educated in evangelical Christian homeschool circles, as a teenager he was living in Louisville, Kentucky when he experienced a crisis of faith, or what he calls a “deconversion.” It was, he told me, a “psychological shock,”

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even “a mystical experience.” He had “a vision of God being sacrificed on the altar of truth.” Traditional Christianity now seemed untenable to him; untenable, too, the secular world, which seemed no less full of unexamined dogma, tinged with moral and intellectual unseriousness. Unwilling to enter the standard life tracks that seemed most easily available to him—ministry, say, or conservative politics—he moved to Seattle, where he worked for a while as a janitor at the University of Washington.

He continued to seek out new avenues of intellectual and spiritual engagement. He got involved with his local rationalist community, ultimately running a rationalist reading group. He also got involved with a group devoted to the practice of Historical European martial arts: people he described as “Renaissance Faire, pagan types.” Reading Nietzsche around this time, he saw in the philosopher a model for how to bridge his intellectual and creative worlds. Nietzsche, Vogel argued, “disarms some of the reasons that intelligent people often end up very cynical by doing better than them, but still coming back around to a perspective of hope, essentially.”

Vogel’s enthusiasm for beauty, for poetry, for mythic references, for an esoteric strain of quasi-occult religious thought called Traditionalism: all of this, his onetime compatriots in the rationality community might once upon a time have dismissed as New Age claptrap. But Vogel’s personal journey from rationalism to postrationalism is part of a wider intellectual shift—in hyper-STEM-focused Silicon Valley circles and beyond—toward a new openness to the religious, the numinous, and the perilously “woo.”

You might call it the *postrationalist turn*: a cultural shift in both relatively “normie” and hyper-weird online spaces. Whether you call it spiritual hunger, reactionary atavism, or postliberal epistemology, more and more young, intellectually inclined, and politically heterodox thinkers (and would-be thinkers) are showing disillusionment with the contemporary faith in technocracy and personal autonomy. They see this combination as having contributed to the fundamentally alienating character of modern Western life. The chipper, distinctly liberal optimism of rationalist culture that defines so much of Silicon Valley ideology—that intelligent people, using the right epistemic tools, can think better, and save the world by doing so—is giving way, not to pessimism, exactly, but to a kind of techno-apocalypticism. We’ve run up against the limits—political, cultural, and social alike—of our civilizational progression; and something newer, *weirder*, maybe even a little more exciting, has to take its place. Some of what we’ve lost—a sense of wonder, say, or the transcendent—must be restored.

Okay, but you can have a sense of wonder without belief in the transcendent — and vice versa. The choice matters.

That’s not a good reading of Nietzsche, who has nothing but contempt for “hope” — in HUMAN, ALL TOO HUMAN he says that it is “the worst of all evils, because it protracts the torment of men.” His thing is to achieve through force of will *affirmation* in the absence of hope.

which I guess you can try to legitimate by associating it w/ Nietzsche, even if everything about it would have appalled him

‘Raise the Sanity Waterline’

A quick primer for the less-online. The rationality community got its start on a few blogs in the early 2000s. The first, *Overcoming Bias*, founded in 2006 and affiliated with Oxford’s Future of Humanity Institute, was initially co-written by economics professor Robin Hanson and, somewhat improbably, Eliezer Yudkowsky, a self-taught AI researcher. Yudkowsky’s chief interest was in saving the world from the existential threat posed by the inevitable development of a hostile artificial intelligence capable of wiping out humanity, and his primary medium for recruiting people to his cause was a wildly popular, nearly 700,000-word fanfiction called *Harry Potter and the Methods of Rationality*, in which Harry learns that the human mind is capable of far more magic than a wooden wand could ever provide.

As its name might suggest, Overcoming Bias was dedicated to figuring out all the ways in which human beings have gotten very good at lying to ourselves, whether through fear of the unknown or a desire for self-aggrandizement or just plain being really bad at math, as well as all the ways in which we might train ourselves to think *better*. By 2009, Yudkowsky had decamped to his own blog, *LessWrong*, which purported to help people be, well, just that, by hacking into our primordial predator-avoiding monkey-brains and helping them to run new neurological software, optimized for life in a complicated modern world.

Both *LessWrong* and the similarly-focused *Slate Star Codex*, founded in 2013 by a Bay Area psychiatrist writing under the pen name Scott Alexander, attracted not just passive readers but enthusiastic commenters, who were drawn to the promise of individual self-improvement as well as the potential to discuss philosophy, science, and technology with people as uncompromisingly devoted to the truth as they believed they were. These commenters—a mixture of the traditionally educated and autodidacts, generally STEM-focused and with a higher-than-average share of people who identified as being on the autism spectrum—tended to be suspicious not just of humanities as a discipline, but of all the ways in which human emotional response clouded practical judgment.

Central to the rationalist worldview was the idea that nothing—not social niceties, not fear of political incorrectness, certainly not unwarranted emotion—could, or should, get between human beings and their ability to apprehend the world as it really is. One longtime rationalist of my acquaintance described the rationalist credo to me as “truth for truth’s sake.” No topic, no matter how potentially politically incendiary, was off-limits. Truth, the rationalists generally believed, would set humanity

I argue in HOW TO THINK that our task should not be the elimination of prejudices but rather, as Gadamer put it, replacing the wrong prejudices that prevent us from understanding with the right prejudices that aid in understanding. The idea that truth-discovery is enabled by subtraction of biases is sadly mistaken.

well, within a certain world

free. Sure, that meant tolerating the odd fascist, Nazi, or neoreactionary in the LessWrong or Slate Star Codex comments section (New Right leader Curtis Yarvin, then writing as Mencius Moldbug, was among them). But free and open debate, even with people whose views you find abhorrent, was so central to the rationalist ethos that the most obvious alternative—the kinds of harm-focused safeguarding central to fostering the ostensibly “safe spaces” of the social justice left—seemed unthinkable.

The rationalist universe soon expanded beyond the blogs themselves. Members of the wider LessWrong community founded the Center for Applied Rationality in Berkeley in 2012. Its purpose was to disseminate rationalist principles more widely—or, in rationalist parlance, to “raise the sanity waterline.” They focused on big-picture, global-level issues, most notably and controversially Yudkowsky’s pet concern: the “x-risk” (“x” for *existential*) that we will inadvertently create unfriendly artificial intelligence that will wipe out human life altogether. [Google “Roko’s basilisk”](#)

There were rationalist sister movements: the transhumanists, who believed in hacking and improving the “wetware” of the human body; and the effective altruists, who posited that the best way to make the world a better place is to abandon cheap sentiment entirely—such as our attachment to those who live in proximity to us—and figure out how to maximize one’s overall utility to the wider world. In practice, that usually means making a lot of money at tech or finance jobs and then donating it to global health initiatives. [See Meghan O’Gieblyn on transhumanism: <https://tinyurl.com/274cuhrs>](#)

There were commune-style rationalist group houses and polyamorous rationalist group houses devoted to modeling rational principles of good living. (In his ethnography of the rationalists, journalist Tom Chivers recounts one group that uses a randomized, but weighted, math game to determine how to split restaurant bills fairly.)

Rationalist culture—and its cultural shibboleths and obsessions—became inextricably intertwined with the founder culture of Silicon Valley as a whole, with its faith in intelligent creators who could figure out the tech, mental and physical alike, that could get us out of the mess of being human. Investor Peter Thiel gave over \$1 million to Yudkowsky’s Machine Intelligence Research Institute. [Elon Musk met his now-ex Grimes when the two bonded on Twitter over a rationalist meme.](#) Meanwhile, the effective altruism movement took a major public relations hit late last year when one of its wealthiest proponents, Sam Bankman-Fried, was arrested and charged with fraud, conspiracy to commit money laundering, and other crimes related to FTX, the cryptocurrency exchange he had founded.

I like to think about how incomprehensible a sentence like this would’ve been 20 years ago

‘Vitamin Deficiency’

For many, rationality culture had at least initially offered a thrilling sense of purpose: a chance to be part of a group of brilliant, committed young heroes capable of working together to save all humanity. One former high-level employee of the Centre for Effective Altruism, who asked not to be identified by name, called the period he spent there in the 2010s the “most exciting time of my career by quite a lot.”

The center had been founded in Oxford in 2011 to help maximize giving and career impact. “I thought ‘this thing is perfect,’” he told me in a Zoom interview, “we’re going to figure out exactly where money should go, and how to improve the world, and if we’re wrong, we’ll figure out how we’re wrong and then we’ll fix that.”

But he soon grew disillusioned with the utilitarianism of rationality culture, which focused so intently on quantifiable markers of success—the number of people on college campuses recruited into EA-approved professional fields, say—that it seemed to leave out something profound about the other side of human life.

Effective altruism, he found, “depowered a lot of people. It made them less interesting and vibrant as people, and more like—trying to fit into a slightly soulless bureaucracy of good-doing.”

Likewise, Tyler Alterman, a former director of growth at the Centre for Effective Altruism—and now somewhere in the postrationalist landscape—describes his experience there as analogous to a “vitamin deficiency.”

“I took that vitamin deficiency to just be the type of necessary sacrifice that one needs in order to think clearly and to put aside one’s personal desires in order to effectively save and improve lives,” Alterman said in a phone interview. Only crushing depression—exacerbated by a severe stress-related gastrointestinal illness—made him re-examine his priorities. “It took a few years of basically being disabled, disabled to the point of not being able to work, to realize that, oh, actually these things that I deemed to be irrational or, like, useless types of creativity, were essential to my functioning.” He longed to form genuine friendships based on mutual affinity and understanding, rather than by screening potential friends for qualities that would “make them a good ally, which will contribute to you both working on existential risk together in an effective way.”

Alterman wasn’t just concerned with his own personal happiness. He was also increasingly convinced that intuition could be useful for the broader rationalist project: namely, figuring out the truth about the world, and using that knowledge to save it from itself.

The biggest problem with EA is that the only tool in its good-doing toolbox is *money* — it literally cannot imagine any human pain that needs to be addressed by non-monetary means



Tyler Alterman gives a TEDx talk on “Morality for a Godless Generation” in 2014.

“It turns out that, like, intuition is incredibly powerful... an incredibly powerful epistemic tool,” he said, “that it just seems like a lot of rationalists weren’t using because it falls into this domain of ‘woo stuff.’”

These critiques were not isolated ones. More and more rationalists and fellow-travelers were yearning to address personal existential crises alongside global existential risks. The realm of the “woo” started to look less like a wrong turn and more like territory to be mined for new insights.

This wasn’t totally out of left field, even for rationalists. They even had a word for such impulses, according to a former employee of the Center for Applied Rationality, Leah Libresco Sargeant, who writes regularly on how rationalism led her to her Catholic faith. They called it “pica,” after a compulsion that causes people to eat dirt or other non-food objects, and that is often a sign of nutritional imbalance.

“When people respond to something,” Sargeant told me in a phone interview, “there’s some hunger here. What is that hunger aimed at? And can you aim it at the right thing?” Whatever was *out there*, and however you could (or couldn’t) justify it with propositional truth-claims or Bayesian reasoning, it probably pointed to something worth exploring.

‘Better to Be Interesting and Wrong...’

By the late 2010s, the rationalist landscape had started to shift, becoming increasingly open to investigating, if not necessarily the truth claims of spirituality, religion, and ritual, then at least some of their beneficial effects. (A rationalist mega-meetup I attended while researching an article in 2018, for example, included a talk on Tarot.) Wider rationalist-verse institutions like Leverage Research—a controversial, Peter Thiel-funded think tank that employed heavily from within the rationalist and effective altruism communities—began to look into more esoteric topics, such as “intention research”: how practitioners of bodywork, energy healing, or mesmerism could use nonverbal cues to subtly influence the mindset of the people on whom they worked.

The rationalists weren’t the only ones experiencing pica. Over the past decade or so, several different intellectual—and less-than-intellectual—subcultures have become far more open than they once were to the language and imagery of the spiritual, the magical, and the religious, and to the traditions that once sustained them.

There’s the rise of what you could call popular neo-Jungianism: figures like Jordan Peterson, who point to the power of myth, ritual, and a relationship to the sacred as a vehicle for combating postmodern alienation—often in uneasy alliance with traditionalist Christians. (A whole article could be written on Peterson’s close intellectual relationship with Roman Catholic Bishop Robert Barron.) There’s the progressive-coded version you can find on TikTok, where witchcraft and activism and sage cleansing and “manifesting” co-exist in a miasma of vibes. There’s the openly fascist version lurking at the margins of the New Right, where blood-and-soil nationalists, paleo bodybuilders, Julius Evola-reading Traditionalists like Steve Bannon, and Catholic sedevacantist podcasters make common cause in advocating for the revival of the mores of a mystic and masculinist past, all the better to inject life into the sclerotic modern world.

But the specific postrationalist version of this tendency is all the more striking for the fact that its genesis lies in a subculture ostensibly dedicated to the destruction of all thoughts non-rational. For example, when I was writing a piece on the rationalists for *Religion News Service* in 2018, I attended a rationalist-affiliated “Secular Solstice” in New York—a non-theistic version of Hannukah in which a series of (battery-operated) candles were lit and subsequently extinguished to represent the snuffing out of superstitions. The ceremony culminated (or would have culminated, if a stubborn candle hadn’t refused to go out) in total darkness, during

Proof that God exists! (And has a sense of humor)

which we were invited to meditate upon the finality of death, the non-existence of God, and the sole avenue for hope: supporting—financially, intellectually, or otherwise—quixotic scientific initiatives capable of prolonging life, or of eliminating death altogether.

It's possible, of course, to look at the rise of the postrationalists as merely the kind of development you'd see in any online subculture that lasts more than a couple of years: the replacement of one model of discourse or fandom by its younger, self-proclaimedly punker cousin. And, certainly, there's something even more *extremely online*, and extremely 2020s, about postrationalism's freewheeling eclecticism. If rationality culture arose out of a very specific early-2000s blog culture—big-name essayists like LessWrong's Eliezer Yudkowsky and Slate Star Codex's Scott Alexander, meticulously parsed by hyper-serious interlocutors in the comments section—"postrat culture" is no less wedded to its own particular medium: Twitter, along with a backchannel network of private group chats and Discord servers and Zoom rooms.

Like their rationalist forebears, the postrationalist community has its own blogger-luminaries—Venkatesh Rao at Ribbonfarm; Sarah Perry, also a Ribbonfarm contributor and author of the anti-natalist manifesto *Every Cradle Is a Grave*; and David Chapman at Meaningness. But the postrationalists also have a more anarchic side, marked by the ubiquity of pseudonymous Twitter micro-celebrities—like eigenrobot (43k followers), and Zero H. P. Lovecraft (98k), who has rejected the postrat label but is widely followed by them—whose accounts, like Vogel's, sometimes blend sincerity and shitposting. They share some of rationality culture's shibboleths—a fondness for speaking in obscure jargon, a commitment to an Overton Window so wide it might as well be a glass house, a contempt for the "wokeness" they see as stifling free intellectual discourse.

You've got to mix shitposting in with the sincerity to give yourself plausible deniability

But they're also far more likely to embrace the seemingly irrational—religious ritual, Tarot, meditation, or the psychological-meets-spiritual self-examination called "shadow work"—in pursuit of spiritual fulfillment, and a vision of life that takes seriously the human need for beauty, meaning, and narrative. Today's postrationalists might be, for example, practitioners of Vajrayana Buddhism, or they might adopt the carefully choreographed practices of self-proclaimed radical agnostic and ritual artist Rebecca Fox, who designs bespoke rituals she refers to as "psychospiritual technology." The movement's defining maxim—according to at least one person familiar with the movement I spoke to—might be a proclamation by writer Sarah Perry: "It is better to be interesting and wrong than it is to be right and boring." **Idea for a new blog: LESS BORING**

Cf. Sam Harris's practice of Dzogchen



*“The virtue of darkness is to face reality at its harshest without looking away.”
—a speaker at a “Secular Solstice” event on Zoom in 2020*

‘Dawn of the Metatribe’

The online rationalist ecosystem had become wider—and weirder—sparked in part by the organic if tech-boostered formation of communities on Twitter, where people-you-may-know algorithms were increasingly connecting members of the burgeoning postrationalist scene with old-school rationalists. These connections only intensified during the pandemic, when people’s lives moved more online and the sacrifices engendered by isolation made many under the rationalist umbrella more conscious of the importance of embodied community.

Tyler Alterman, expanding upon a term he first heard on the Intellectual Explorers Club podcast by Peter Limberg, has called this new wider social landscape the *metatribe*. In a September 2020 Twitter thread influential enough that several people I spoke to for this piece seemed aware of it, Alterman declared the year 2020 the “dawn of the metatribe.”

The metatribe, Alterman wrote, “is neither nihilist nor locked onto an ethical system. It has political opinions without being left, right, or center...metatribers often appear to be ‘heterodox.’” The metatribe, furthermore, “is scientific without scientism. It is spiritual while being neither new age nor traditionally religious.” It includes both members of the specific “postrat” subculture as well as thinkers from other subcultures caught up in the wider postrationalist turn.

The “metatribe” is not the only term used by members or ideological fellow-travelers. Others call it “the liminal web,” “the sense-making web,” or the “intellectual deep web.” Who counts as metatribe members—rationalists, postrationalists, metamodernists, or accounts that just post good memes—is hardly set in stone.

But we can identify in the modern metatribe a distinct cultural and intellectual identity: at once hyper-aware of the problems posed by human irrationality, and committed to the notion that our emotional and spiritual lives are as fundamental to human flourishing as our intellectual ones. Being “allergic to political ideology,” as Alterman told me in our interview, metatribe members are often political magpies, taking their practices and theories from across the ideological spectrum, even as their commitment to radical openness renders them at times uncomfortably close to more explicitly right-wing circles like the intellectual dark web—at least according to their progressive critics.

They’re interested in dissolving the barriers between intellectual disciplines, as well as between the mental and embodied life—Alterman compares them to the ancient Greeks, where “it wasn’t that unusual for someone to be both a philosopher and a wrestler.” And while few of them find a home among the seemingly implausible dogmas of traditional, organized religion, they’re far more willing than their rationalist forebears to see in religious, spiritual, or even esoteric or occult practice an avenue toward self-transformation in the service of a meaningful life. They at once evoke the classic Californian Ideology famously described in 1995 by Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron—equal parts hippie mysticism and relentless self-development—and subvert its linear narrative of human progress.

John Vervaeke, a cognitive scientist at the University of Toronto whose work many of the metatribe cite as highly influential, calls the metatribe’s practice a *re-inventio*. In Latin, Vervaeke told me in a Zoom interview, *inventio* means both “invent” and “discover.”

“It’s all mixed together,” Vervaeke said. “This is one of the most culturally significant things that is happening right now—this *re-inventio* of what sacredness means and what that experience of sacredness points to... [which] has moved out of being the proprietary purview of the established religions.” Religions, Vervaeke says, are “still important partners in this process, but they don’t have the monopoly on it anymore.”

Vervaeke’s work deals extensively with what he calls the modern “meaning crisis”: the idea that we don’t understand what, exactly, we’re living *for*. According to Vervaeke, rationalist culture—to say nothing of

It’s been a loooooong time since religions had a monopoly on this process — this is starting to sound a bit like the reinvention of 19th-century Romnticisst spiritualism

our contemporary world more broadly—has, in its technocratic worship of human computing power, lost sight of the more complex questions involved in living the good life, or what he calls wisdom.

“Our Cartesian reduction of rationality to sort of computational abilities, and then the reduction of that to just communication and communicative manipulation—we have lost a lot,” said Vervaeke. “That notion of rationality that [rationalists] are making use of is seriously truncated, seriously missing what most of the ancient world thought they were referring to. They used words like *logos* and *ratio*, and those older notions of rationality were bound up with wisdom, were bound up with practice, with the use of the imaginal—that which the imagination can transform, rather than the merely imaginary—with “ritual, transformation, aspiration. And so all of those things are now coming back in.”

This is true, and important! (though something that many Christian thinkers have been saying for 2000 years, but whatever)

Wisdom, for Vervaeke—as for the metatribe generally—is something distinct from, if related to, the raw, computational processing power so prized by the rationalist community. It involves a holistic approach to thinking—*what does it mean to live a good life?*—that can’t be quantified the way you can quantify, say, the number of malaria nets you’ve sent to the developing world. It’s also, unlike the often hyper-individualistic (and autodidact-focused) rationality culture, deeply wedded to a conception of tradition, and of the collected insights of others more broadly, as a source of intellectual value.

To mature in wisdom, after all, takes a village, says Vervaeke. “You have to acquire identities and roles and responsibilities and virtues... in order to properly become wise. That takes a community that is willing to hang with you for a long time, which means the best shot of finding such a community is one that has a tradition and a history behind it.”

ditto

In this sense, the metatribe project is as much about recovery as it is about progression: reviving a vision of communal life, communal responsibility, and communal reverence for the sacred that the atomized modern world has rendered increasingly rare—while still embracing the freedom and technological comfort modernity has made possible. As another plugged-in postrat, who tweets as @bigmaster troll, told me via Twitter DM: “There’s a sense where modernity is kind of great, because sacredness leads to irrationality, problems, wars etc. That maybe trading off a bit of guaranteed meaning for more choice, warm homes and less violence... is actually a pretty good deal. At the same time, [postrationalists] are basically all mourning the loss of enchantment.”

Cool, because as we all know there haven’t been any irrationality, problems, or wars in modernity

“In a way,” he wrote, “you can summarise post rationality, as, like, ‘how do you get the sacred without violence.’”

Question: Have you ever heard of the “twentieth century”?

‘To Discover the Laws of Magic and Become...’

If the metatribe reflects anything about our wider cultural moment, it is our shared disillusionment with the broader liberal optimism the rationalists have come to embody. The promise proffered by so much of Silicon Valley—that we can hack our way to Enlightenment, transcending our humanity along the way—no longer seems plausible amid the broad ennui and general pessimism that has settled into our culture over the last decade.

As Vogel puts it:

The reason that history feels both out of control and stagnant is because we’re alienated from it. Our spirits can’t actively participate in it. We constantly engage with it in terms of geopolitics, or trying to build the right kind of AI, or design the right kind of society. We’re like “*Can we figure out the formula for making people into great founders?*”

At its best, the kind of holistic questioning preferred by many metatribe members offers a way forward beyond either liberal optimism or the atavistic pessimism of the New Right: How can we effectively and altruistically advocate for the good life of others, when we ourselves aren’t sure what the good life even means?

But it’s also true that metatribe discourse remains more wedded to contemporary liberal individualism than many of its members might care to admit. While they are often hungry for, and vocally supportive of, the kind of communal spiritual practices and rituals that might anchor a well-lived life, they’re more interested in spirituality’s function—how it contributes to personal fulfillment—than in its claims to truth, which they largely treat as irrelevant or obsolete.

The postrationalists’ interest in religion and spirituality, says Leah Libresco Sargeant, can be likened to the wider metatribe interest in psychedelics: both are tools in the service of better thinking or optimized life perspective. She describes their general mindset as: “I think religion is very powerful and it’s interesting that religious people have greater life satisfaction. So should I try doing religion like it’s recreational drugs to see where that takes me?”

Religion, meditation, magic, occultism, shadow work—all these, in the metatribe model, are mere avenues for self-development and self-transcendence. Cast a love spell, go to church, attend a 5Rhythms ecstatic dance class, take psychedelic mushrooms—all of these, functionally, amount to the same thing: an injection of what foundational postrat writer David Chapman calls *meaningness*.

The question is whether people will commit themselves over the long term to “any” practice that they do not believe to be grounded in truth or truth-conducive. I tend to doubt it.

“Meaningness,” Chapman writes on his website, entails that “meaning is real but not definite. It is neither objective nor subjective. It is neither given by an external force nor a human invention.” It requires, he says, taking from the eternalist stance the commitment that human beings do, and indeed should, experience the world as a locus of meaning, and from the nihilist stance the rejection that there is a single “eternal source of meaning” behind it. Or, as Sarah Perry puts it, “There’s no One True Ritual Order that’s going to survive forever. The best hope is maybe there are [ritual] micronutrients or vitamins that we can discover, and then figure out how to supply them under different technological regimes.” Spirituality exists not in itself, but for us.

What we see here is the positing that meaning is good and important and out there, but also the conviction that, in practice, the precise contours of that meaning are up to us to decide. It’s spirituality for a secular age: anchored by the conviction that reality is downstream of our personal psychological power.

If there *is* a doctrine underpinning both rationalist and postrationalist thought, it is this quintessential liberal faith in human potential, combined with an awareness of the way in which human imaginal power does not



merely respond to, but actively shapes, the world around us. The rationalists dreamed of overcoming bias and annihilating death; the postrats are more likely to dream of integrating our shadow-selves or experiencing oneness. But both camps evince a profound faith in what we might

call *human godliness*: the idea that we are not only the recipients of the world around us but also its creators. Indeed, it’s little wonder that so many metatribe members find themselves drawn to esoteric or occult spiritual schools of thought like chaos magick or Traditionalism, schools in which it is difficult to distinguish the human power to shape and persuade from the outright supernatural.

In his *Harry Potter and the Methods of Rationality*—perhaps old-school rationalists’ most effective recruiting text—Eliezer Yudkowsky is clear that part of the appeal of rationality is the promise of self-overcoming, of

This is what Wallace Stevens calls a “supreme fiction” — see the unpacking of that concept in Frank Kermode’s **THE SENSE OF AN ENDING**

It’s like squaring the circle — looking for a Meaning that can order my life without making any imposition on me. In the end you have to choose one or the other. You can have your freedom, without Meaning, or Meaning without what you (wrongly) believe to be freedom

becoming more than merely human. Harry, we learn, “wants to discover the laws of magic and become a god.” Yet it is rationality, in the end, that gives Harry the godlike powers of understanding, and shaping, his world—a world that, Yudkowsky tells us, will one day be one in which “the descendants of humanity have spread from star to star” and “won’t tell the children about the history of Ancient Earth until they’re old enough to bear it; and when they learn they’ll weep to hear that such a thing as Death had ever once existed!”

The metatribe may have different, well, methods. But their goal, too, is self-transcendence. As Vogel told me: “Both Nietzscheanism and the occult discourse of—the hermeticism—and even modern rationality: a thread through all of these things is the implicit desire to become a god.” Doing the psycho-spiritual work necessary to unchain yourself from mere human facticity is the only way out of the tragic mire of ordinary human life.

Does Vogel, personally, wish to be a god?

He declined to answer on the record.

Thesis: No two impulses could be more opposed to each other than this “desire to become a god” and what Christians call *theosis* — because the path to *theosis* goes through *kenosis*