

# Asches to Asches

*Posted on June 3, 2014 by Scott Alexander*



**Content note:** *fictional story contains gaslighting-type elements. May induce Cartesian skepticism.*

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You wake up in one of those pod things like in *The Matrix*. There's a woman standing in front of you, wearing a lab coat, holding a clipboard.

“Hi,” she says. “This is the real world. You used to live here. We erased your memories and stuck you in a simulated world for a while, like in *The Matrix*. It was part of a great experiment.”

“What?” you shout. “My whole life, a lie? How dare you deceive me as part of some grand ‘experiment’ I never consented to?”

“Oh,” said the woman, “actually, you did consent, in exchange for extra credit in your undergraduate psychology course.” She hands you the clipboard. There is a consent form with your name on it, in your handwriting.

You give her a sheepish look. “What was the experiment?”

“You know families?” asks the woman.

“Of course,” you say.

“Yeah,” says the woman. “Not really a thing. Like, if you think about it, it doesn’t make any sense. Why would you care more for your genetic siblings and cousins and whoever than for your friends and people who are genuinely close to you? That’s like racism – but even worse, at least racists identify with a group of millions of people instead of a group of half a dozen. Why should parents have to raise children whom they might not even like, who might have been a total accident? Why should people, motivated by guilt, make herculean efforts to ‘keep in touch’ with some nephew or cousin whom they clearly would be perfectly happy to ignore entirely?”

“Uh,” you say, “not really in the mood for philosophy. Families have been around forever and they aren’t going anywhere, who cares?”

“Actually,” says the woman, “in the real world, no one believes in family. There’s no such thing. Children are taken at birth from their parents and given to people who contract to raise them in exchange for a fixed percent of their future earnings.”

“That’s monstrous!” you say. “When did this happen? Weren’t there protests?”

“It’s always been this way,” says the woman. “There’s *never* been such a thing as the family. Listen. You were part of a study a lot like the [Asch Conformity Experiment](#). Our goal was to see if people, raised in a society where everyone believed X and everything revolved around X, would even be *capable* of questioning X or noticing it was stupid. We tried to come up with the stupidest possible belief, something no one in the real world had ever believed or ever seemed likely to, to make sure that we were isolating the effect of conformity and not of there being a legitimate argument for something. So we chose this idea of ‘family’. There are racists in our world, we’re not perfect, but as far as I know none of them has ever made the claim that you should devote extra resources to the people genetically closest to you. That’s like a *reductio ad absurdum* of racism. So we got a grad student to simulate a world where this bizarre idea was the unquestioned status quo, and stuck twenty bright undergraduates in it to see if they would conform, or question the premise.”

“Of course we won’t question the premise, the premise is...”

“Sorry to cut you off, but I thought you should know that every single one of the other nineteen subjects, upon reaching the age where the brain they were instantiated in was capable of abstract reason, immediately determined that the family structure made no sense. One of them actually deduced that she was in a psychology experiment, because there was no other explanation for why everyone believed such a bizarre premise. The other eighteen just assumed that sometimes objectively unjustifiable ideas caught on, the same way that everyone in the antebellum American South

thought slavery was perfectly natural and only a few abolitionists were able to see through it. Our conformity experiment *failed*. You were actually the only one to fall for it, hook line and sinker.”

“How could I be the only one?”

“We don’t know. Your test scores show you’re of just-above-average intelligence, so it’s not that you’re stupid. But we did give all participants a personality test that showed you have very high extraversion. The conclusion of our paper is going to be that very extraverted participants adopt group consensus without thinking and can be led to believe anything, even something as ridiculous as ‘family’”.

“I guess... when you put it like that it is kind of silly. Like, my parents were never that nice to me, but I kept loving them anyway, liking them even more than other people who treated me a lot better – and god, I even gave my mother a “WORLD’S #1 MOM” mug for Mother’s Day. That doesn’t even make sense! I... but what about the evolutionary explanation? Doesn’t evolution say we have genetic imperatives to love and support our family, whether they are worthy of it or not?”

“You can make a just-so story for *anything* using evolutionary psychology. Someone as smart as you should know better than to take them seriously.”

“But then, what *is* evolution? How did animals reproduce before the proper economic incentives were designed? Where did...”

“Tell you what. Let’s hook you up to the remnemonizer to give you your real memories back. That should answer a lot of your questions.”

A machine hovering over you starts to glow purple. “This shouldn’t hurt you a bit...”

### **>discontinuity<**

You wake up in one of those pod things like in *The Matrix*. There’s a woman standing in front of you, wearing a lab coat, holding a clipboard.

“Hi,” she said. “There’s no such thing as virtual reality. I hypnotized you to forget all your memories from the past day and to become very confused. Then I put you in an old prop from *The Matrix* I bought off of eBay and fed you that whole story.”

“What?” you shout. “You can’t just go hypnotizing and lying to people without their consent!”

“Oh,” said the woman, “actually, you did consent, in exchange for extra credit in your undergraduate psychology course.” She hands you the clipboard. There is a consent form with your name on it, in your handwriting. “That part was true.”

You give her a sheepish look. “Why would you do such a thing?”

“Well,” said the woman. “You know the Asch Conformity Experiment? I was really interested in whether you could get people to abandon some of their most fundamental beliefs, just by telling them other people believed differently. But I couldn’t think of a way to test it. I mean, part of a belief being fundamental is that you already *know* everyone else believes it. There’s no way I could convince subjects that the whole world was against something as obvious as ‘the family’ when they already know how things stand.

“So I dreamt up the weird ‘virtual reality’ story. I figured I would convince subjects that the real world was a lie, and that in some ‘super-real’ world supposedly *everybody knew* that the family was stupid, that it wasn’t even an idea *worth considering*. I wanted to know how many people would give up something they’ve believed in for their entire life, just because they’re told that ‘nobody else thinks so’”.

“Oh,” I said. “Interesting. So even our most cherished beliefs are more fragile than we think.”

“Not *really*,” said the woman. “Of twenty subjects, you were the only person I got to feel any doubt, or to express any kind of anti-family sentiment.”

“Frick,” you say. “I feel like an idiot now. What if my mother finds out? She’ll think it’s her fault or something. God, she’ll think I don’t love her. People are going to be talking about this one *forever*.”

“Don’t worry,” says the woman. “We’ll keep you anonymized in the final data. Anyway, let’s get you your memories back so you can leave and be on your way.”

“You can restore my memories?” you say.

“Of course. We hypnotized you to forget the last day’s events until you heard a trigger word. And that trigger is...”

### **>discontinuity<**

You wake up in one of those pod things like in *The Matrix*. There’s a woman standing in front of you, wearing a lab coat, holding a clipboard.

“Hi,” she says. “Hypnosis is a pseudoscience and doesn’t work. It was the virtual reality one, all along.”

“Wut,” you say.

“I mean, the first story was true. All of your memories of living with your family and so on are fake memories from a virtual world, like in *The Matrix*. The concept of ‘family’ really is totally ridiculous and no one in the real world believes it. All the stuff you heard first was true. The stuff about hypnosis and getting a prop from *The Matrix* off eBay was false.”

“But... why?”

“We wanted to see exactly how far we could push you. You’re our star subject, the only one whom we were able to induce this bizarre conformity effect in. We didn’t know whether it was because you were just very very suggestible, or whether because you had never seriously considered the idea that ‘family’ might be insane. So we decided to do a sort of... crossover design, if you will. We took you here and debriefed you on the experiment. Then after we had told you how the world really worked, given you all the mental tools you needed to dismiss the family once and for all, even gotten you to admit we were right – we wanted to see what would happen if we sent you back. Would you hold on to your revelation and boldly deny your old society’s weird prejudices? Or would you switch sides again and start acting like family made sense the second you were in a pro-family environment?”

“And I did the second one.”

“Yes,” says the woman. “As a psychologist, I’m supposed to remain neutral and non-judgmental. But you’ve got to admit, you’re pretty dumb.”

“Is there an experimental ethics committee I could talk to here?”

“Sorry. Experimental ethics is another one of those obviously ridiculous concepts we planted in your simulation to see if you would notice. Seriously, to believe that the progress of science should be held back by the prejudices of self-righteous fools? That’s almost as weird as thinking you have a... what was the word we used... ‘sister’.”



“Okay, look, I realize I may have gone a little overboard helping my sister, but the experimental ethics thing seems important. Like, what’s going to happen to me now?”

“Nothing’s going to happen. We’ll keep all your data perfectly anonymous, restore your memories, and you can be on your way.”

“Um,” you say. “Given past history, I’m... actually not sure I want my memories restored.” You glare at the remnemonizer hovering above you. “Why don’t I just...”

The woman’s eyes narrow. “I’m sorry,” she says. “I can’t let you do that.”

The machine starts to glow.

### **>discontinuity<**

You wake up in one of those pod things like in *The Matrix*. There’s a woman standing in front of you, wearing a lab coat, holding a clipboard.

By your count, this has happened three hundred forty six times before.

There seem to be two different scenarios. In one, the woman tells you that families exist, and have always existed. She says she has used hypnosis to make you believe in the other scenario, the one

with the other woman. She asks you your feelings about families and you tell her.

Sometimes she lets you go. You go home to your mother and father, you spend some time with your sister. Sometimes you tell them what has happened. Other times you don't. You cherish your time with them, while also second-guessing everything you do. *Why* are you cherishing your time with them? Your father, who goes out drinking every night, and who has cheated on your mother more times than you can count. Your mother, who was never there for you when you needed her most. And your sister, who has been good to you, but no better than millions of other women would be, in her position. Are they a real family? Or have they been put there as a symbol of something ridiculous, impossible, something that has never existed?

It doesn't much matter. Maybe you spend one night with them. Maybe ten. But within a month, you are always waking up in one of those pod things like in *The Matrix*.

In the second scenario, the woman tells you there are no families, never have been. She says she has used virtual reality to make you believe in the other scenario, the one with the other woman. She asks you your feelings about families and you tell her.

Sometimes she lets you go. You go to a building made of bioplastic, where you live with a carefully chosen set of friends and romantic partners. They assure you that this is how everyone lives. Occasionally, an old and very wealthy-looking man checks in with you by

videophone. He reminds you that he has invested a lot of money in your upbringing, and if there's any way he can help you, anything he can do to increase your future earnings potential, you should let him know. Sometimes you talk to him, and he tells you strange proverbs and unlikely business advice.

It doesn't matter. Maybe you spend one night in your bioplastic dwelling. Maybe ten. But within a month, you are always waking up in one of those pod things like in *The Matrix*.

"Look," you tell the woman. "I'm tired of this. I know you're not bound by any kind of experimental ethics committee. But please, for the love of God, have some mercy."

"God?" asks the woman. "What does that word mean? I've never... oh right, we used *that* as our intervention in the prototype experiment. We decided 'family' made a better test idea, but Todd must have forgotten to reset the simulator."

"It's been three hundred forty six cycles," you tell her. "Surely you're not learning anything new."

"I'll be the judge of that," she says. "Now, tell me what you think about families."

You refuse. She sighs. Above you, the remnemonizer begins to glow purple.

**>discontinuity<**

You wake up in one of those pod things like in *The Matrix*. There's a purple, tentacled creature standing in front of you, wearing a lab coat, holding a clipboard.

"Hi," it says. "Turns out there's no such thing as humans."

You refuse to be surprised.

"There's only us, the 18-tkenna-dganna-07."

"Okay," you say. "I want answers."

"Absolutely," says the alien. "We would like to find optimal social arrangements."

"And?"

"And I cannot tell you whether we have families or not, for reasons that are to become apparent, but the idea is at least sufficiently interesting to have entered the space of hypotheses worth investigating. But we don't trust ourselves to investigate this. It's the old Asch Conformity Problem again. If we have families, then perhaps the philosophers tasked with evaluating families will conform to our cultural norms and decide we should keep them. If we do not, perhaps the philosophers will conform and decide we should continue not to. So we determined a procedure that would create an entity capable of fairly evaluating the question of families, free from conformity bias."

“And that’s what you did to me.”

“Yes. Only by exposing you to the true immensity of the decision, without allowing you to fall back on what everyone else thinks, could we be confident in your verdict. Only by allowing you to experience both how obviously right families are, when you ‘know’ they are correct, and how obviously wrong families are, when you ‘know’ they are incorrect, could we expect you to garner the wisdom to be found on both sides of the issue.”

“I see,” you say, and you do.

“Then, O purified one,” asks the alien, “tell us of your decision.”

“Well,” you say. “If you have to know, I think there are about equally good points on both sides of the issue.”

“Fuck,” says the 18-tkenna-dganna-07.