



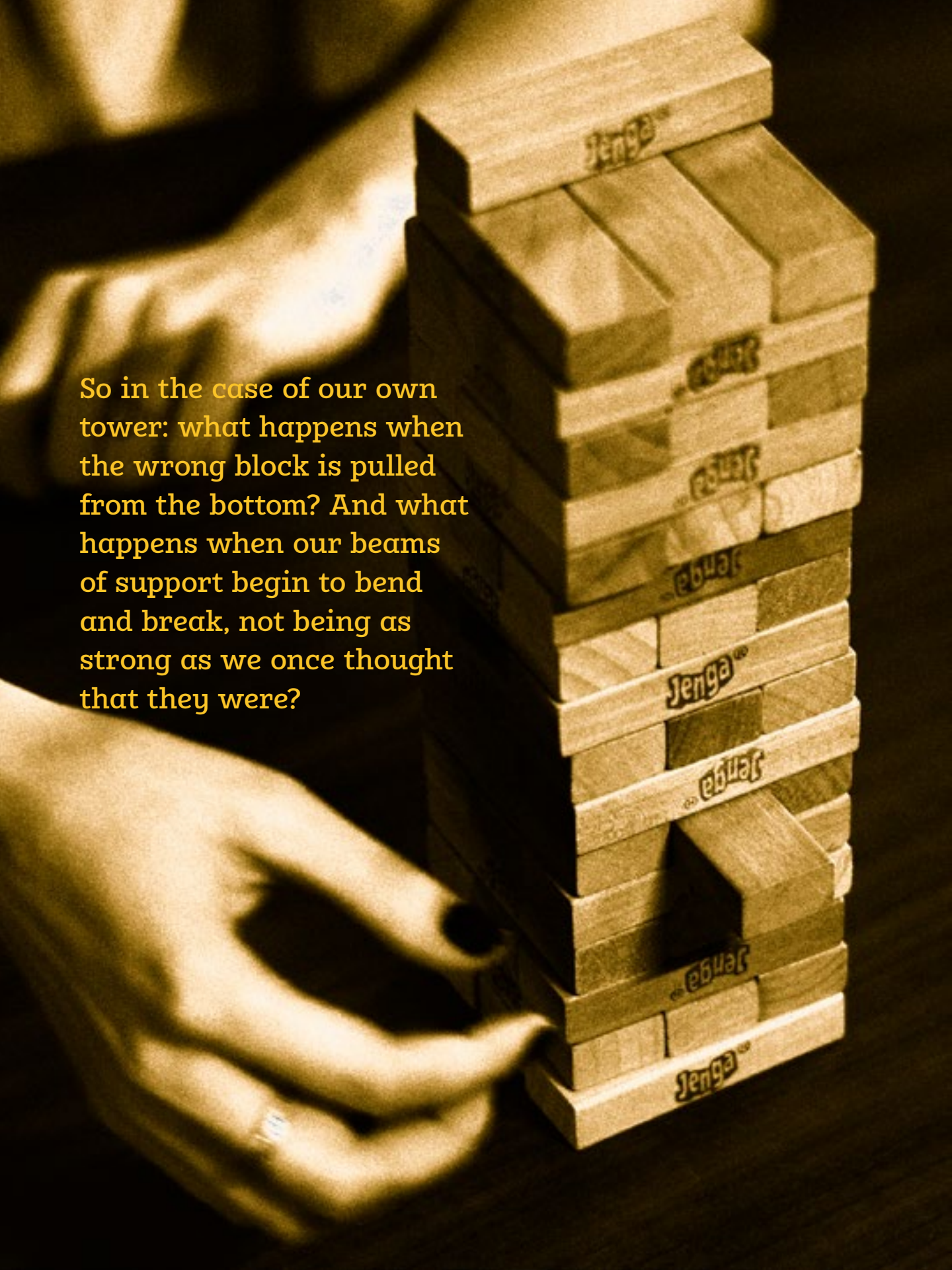
THE Simulation

Wes Null

In his 1943 paper entitled “A Theory of Human Motivation”, Abraham Maslow, the famed American psychologist, first published his landmark model of human development that was to become widely known as “Maslow’s Pyramid of Needs”. The model was represented as a pyramid divided into five different tiers which described the fundamental forces that drive human beings to do what they do. The forces, in order from lowest to highest, are as follows: physiology, safety, love and belongingness, self-esteem, and self-actualization. It is said that through the course of normal human development, a person has to build their pyramid from the ground-up; they are to start first with the satisfaction of most basic needs to survive and must resolve those stages before they embark on the search for higher, more emotional needs, such as the love of friends and family or their sense of meaning and purpose in the world.

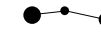


Pyramids are widely recognized by architects and engineers alike as being among the sturdiest of structures with respect to shape, and being notoriously difficult to destroy. When the 12th century Sultan of Egypt Al-Aziz Uthman of the Ayyubid Dynasty attempted to demolish the Great Pyramids of Giza during his reign, he was forced to give up due to his gradual realization of the enormity of the task. When he tried again with the smaller pyramid of Menkaure, his men were only able to leave a single little gash in one side of the structure after eight consecutive months of hard labor. Needless to say, there is a reason that they have stood the test of time.



So in the case of our own tower: what happens when the wrong block is pulled from the bottom? And what happens when our beams of support begin to bend and break, not being as strong as we once thought that they were?

Therefore, it may be natural to assume that the pyramids that we build for ourselves reflect that same imperturbability. Yet, for realism's sake, let's entertain the possibility that our Pyramid of Needs is, in reality, not a pyramid at all. Maybe, it's more like a tower.

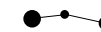


Towers, in contrast, fall. Anyone who has endured the chagrin over pulling out the last Jenga block at the birthday party or watches the news knows that. Many times, all it takes to bring down years of manpower and planning is a little incidental damage to the bottom. When the structural integrity of the base is compromised, especially in light of an engineering flaw or the weakness of building materials, a chain reaction can send a tower tumbling down in seconds.

So in the case of our own tower: what happens when the wrong block is pulled from the bottom? And what happens when our beams of support begin to bend and break, not being as strong as we once thought that they were?



To this day I still don't completely know where it came from. One mid-October afternoon you're throwing a football around with the other two male cousins in the driveway, and that same evening your mom and doctor have their hands on your back, telling you to breathe as you try your best to contain your hyperventilating in a tiny, pale examination room. There was no physical injury, no breaking news, no witness of anything traumatic that precipitated it. Yet, soon enough, it would become clear to me that after that day nothing would ever be the same for me again.

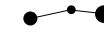


I do know, however, that I was a pretty lonely kid. One of my favorite games that I would play would be pretending to be an explorer through the areas of my neighborhood. I would set off into the woods alone and "chart" new territories, along with their associated creeks, trails, and small abandoned buildings. I would draw maps, swing around a wooden stick as a sword, and plant little "flags" (often other wooden sticks) on various discovered landmarks. All of this I could do

alone. The other kids in the neighborhood played a lot of soccer, but I was never any good at it. Every time I tried somehow I always ended up watching the rest of them play from the side of the yard. Regardless, I still enjoyed their company.

Also, it's not like there wasn't any suspicion before this. A few years prior I remember asking my mom questions about God, Jesus, and the devil. I remember being confused by the fact that God, who knows, created, and controls everything, would create certain people knowing that they themselves would never hear the gospel in their lifetime, and that they wouldn't be saved from hell in the end, no matter how good of a person they might've been during their time on earth. My mom tried her best to assure me that we have no way of knowing God's plan, and left it to me to imagine God giving one last chance to every nonbeliever arriving at the pearly gates of heaven. I remember thinking, "Well, if that's really the case, why even bother talking about the Bible in the first place?" But I didn't say it aloud because I was afraid to upset her. Having not reached an answer I was satisfied with, my doubts increased going forward, but I kept them to myself, not wanting

to worry my mom. I wished I could just let it go, but I couldn't; I needed something tangible to hold on to.



Yet what I felt on that day was something deeper than the religious doubt that I was familiar with. My cousins had branched off to the other side of the yard, tossing the ball between them as I diverged from them for some reason that I can't remember. My uncle had recently arrived to pick them up from our house, and he had gotten out of his car and was talking to my mom. I remember the crisp chill of the sunny October sky in the fall, and the glare in my eyes as I glanced upward toward the sky. In that moment, everything felt in its right place. My mother and uncle were smiling, absorbed in their conversation; my cousins were continuing to run in circles around the perimeter of the house; and I just stood there, taking in the scene. As a ten-year-old kid, there aren't very many situations which pull you into thinking about life itself. It seems like kind of a waste of time at the time, especially when you're in the middle of having fun.

Regardless, in that moment in the sun, I started to think about it.



I noticed all of the smiling and laughing people around me, each in their own conversation, and wondered if they too experienced the same appreciation for the moment as I did; if they appreciated the same chill breeze through their hair or how calming and sweet the gentle wafting of the orangish-red leaves appeared to them from above. I thought about my own particular thoughts and feelings that I couldn't convey in words, and the strangeness that everyone that I saw around me must also contain this indescribable reservoir of thought within them. Miraculous.

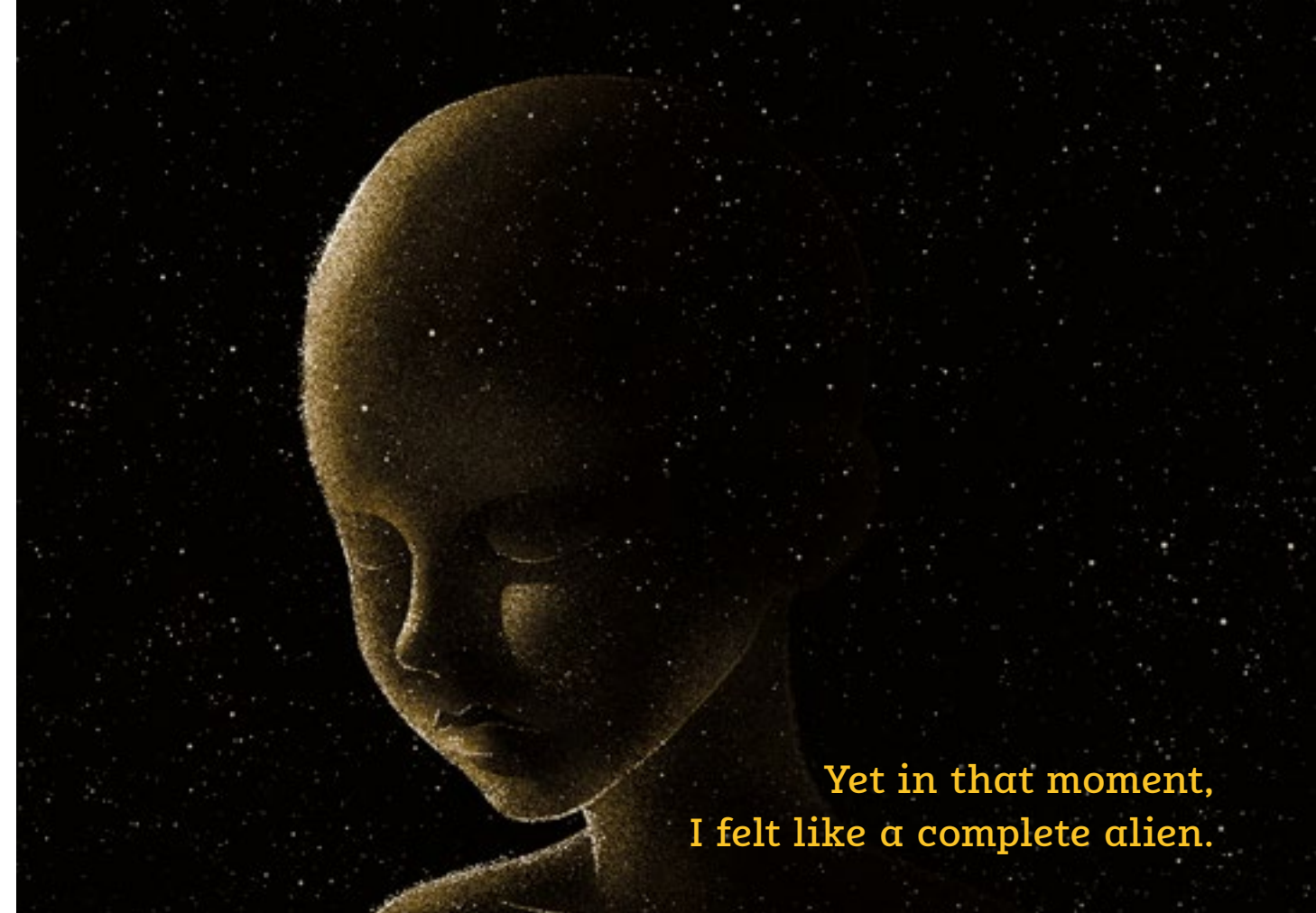
But, then again, what if they, in fact, didn't have that, at all? What if that just wasn't true?

I can see their smiles. I can hear their laughs. Yet the realization slowly began to dawn on me that I had no way of making sure that these people had thoughts of their own. Sure, they spoke words and gave their opinions. They smiled, frowned, laughed and cried in the same way that I did. Yet in that moment I recognized that only I myself could prove that these things came from an actual source, and no matter how I tried, I would never be able to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that these behaviors actually came from a real place.

It was then that I fully began to feel the gravity of this possibility: my parents, my sister, my cousins, my neighborhood friends, my teachers, and an entire planet of billions of people may be non-playable characters in a vast game in which I was the only one with any real consciousness.

I imagined a panel of humans or god-like entities tending to some remote computer in a different universe, entering code into the fabric of my daily life. I thought of how if it's possible that humans could eventually develop technology sophisticated enough to create a simulated life in the future, then it is all the more possible that I am already living in one.

My heart beat faster as I racked my brain for ways to put this question to rest. Yet this doubt seemed to permeate everywhere. I didn't know where to even begin to search for a resolution. I could feel myself growing pale. I could be living in a gigantic lie

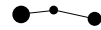


**Yet in that moment,
I felt like a complete alien.**

While the perception of living in a false reality seems scary on its face, it wasn't just the idea of living in a simulated universe that disturbed me the most. It was the idea that I was alone in this simulation. Being an object among many within the big hologram would be unsettling, but at least then it wouldn't be an idea that I would have to face on my own.

Yet in that moment, I felt like a complete alien. The implication from this line of thinking was that all of the foundational security that I had developed from the love of my friends and family, as well as the general sense of safety afforded to me by my environment, could be torn from its tethers at any moment, at the behest of some far-off team of unseen simulators. My entire universe could very well be some kind of cruel joke, set up for experimentation's sake by some scientists thousands of years and/or light-years away, crossing his or her fingers for their universe's equivalent of a Nobel Prize. It was as if these simulators were killing everyone around me by robbing them of the opportunity to truly exist.

I felt overwhelmed. I was ten years old and felt powerless to make sense of any of this. It was too much for my head. The thought of a mother, father, sister, and friends not being real was too much for a kid to handle. With the most basic assurances of life in flux, I broke down, and my tower collapsed.



Before long I was bouncing between various doctor's offices, building up my collection of prescription-sponsored pens. The first psychiatrist put me on Ability and Zoloft. My mother did the best she could with me, God bless her. My father struggled to understand what was happening at all. He still might not.

Teachers began to all leave the same note on my report card: "Does not turn in homework". It's hard to imagine, in retrospect, how heavy I was on my parents during this period of time. I struggled to make it through the day without breaking down. Talking about it with my mom would help temporarily, until she started talking about God. Then, a lot of the time, it got worse.

Dr. Reilly, the psychologist that I ended up seeing, looked almost exactly like Richard Dreyfuss in Mr. Holland's Opus. I liked him a lot. Every week I would attempt to disentangle the threads of the crazed back-and-forth in my head; the one that would periodically send me spiraling and have me burying my face in one of the pillows of the guest bedroom downstairs. Yet oddly enough, every week I was met with the same attitude from Dr. Reilly: measured calm. Now that I think about it, this made all of the difference.

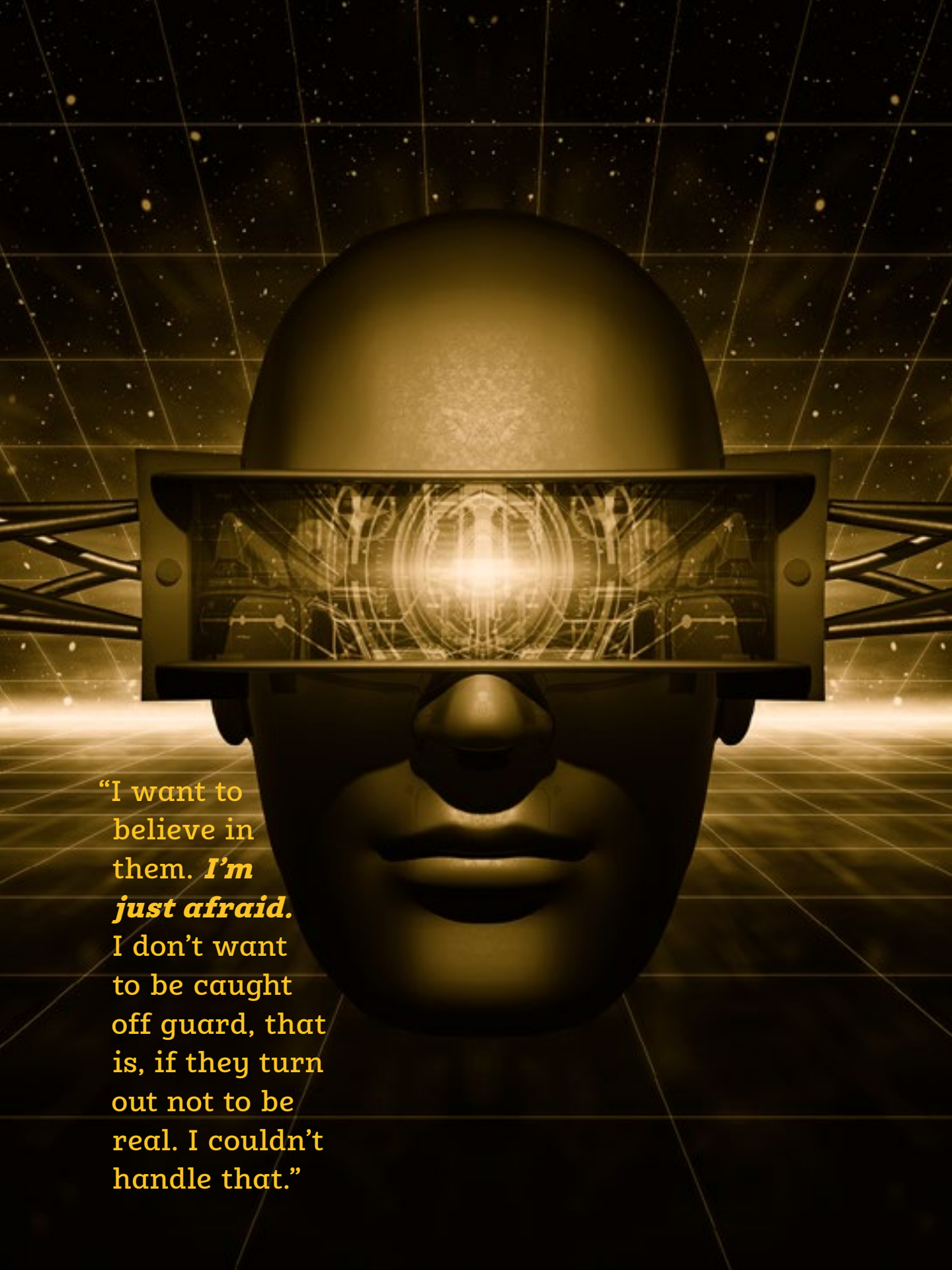
Throughout this time, I had held on to the assumption that my doubts over the reality of the world around me were unique and unprecedented. I had taken it for granted that I had punctured some new hole into the fabric of perception, and that revealing this to others might frighten, estrange, or anger them. Part of me seemed to be afraid of scaring the people around me, and the other more irrational part of me was afraid of my potential reaction to their reaction: that I would take their shock to mean that my questioning had disrupted the integrity of simulation, or had angered the simulators. Maybe the simulators would begin to

move the people I told, like chess pieces, in order to try to silence me, or to try to make me forget about them. Therefore, if I were to start feeling better, it may actually spell victory for the simulators. I had all sorts of ideas about how the simulation worked, and who was running it, none of which were particularly consoling.

Yet all of what I had to say was met by Dr. Reilly with relative coolness. It wasn't a matter of him not understanding me, either. He was more than capable of repeating the things I said back to me, paraphrased. It just didn't faze him very much. Seeing him react this way was a relief for me. Maybe I could find my way out of this after all.

Every session I would explain all of the thoughts and feelings about the simulation that were nagging me that





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particular week, and every week he listened, nodding along. When I would finish my weekly brain-dump, he would first assure me that he really did understand the things that I had told him. He acknowledged the problems and the pains that I would run into carrying around such thoughts all of the time. Shortly after, however, he started asking questions. This is where I really began to learn.

“So” he asked, putting his doctor’s clipboard down on his desk. “Do you have proof? Have you actually seen these people running this simulation?”

“Well, no.” I said. “But I can’t be sure that they are not there.”

“Ok” he nodded. “So, if I’m following you, it makes sense to you to believe that these ‘Simulators’ that you’ve never seen are real, but not all of the people, including family and friends, that you have seen so far in your life with your own eyes?”

“I want to believe in them. I’m just afraid. I don’t want to be caught off guard, that is, if they turn out not to be real. I couldn’t handle that.” Then another thought occurred to me. “And if there was a simulation, what is stopping them from making the ‘design’ as real as possible?” I sped up. “Wouldn’t they try to make it convincing, like by making the world super big with a lot of people? What if they are trying to make this make as little sense as possible, just to confuse me?”

I was growing tenser as I spoke, because I honestly didn’t know how he could reply to that. It appeared that I had become trapped in my worst fear. The implications felt menacing. Even if I didn’t completely believe in this theory, how could I ever really stop worrying about the possibility of its truth if the whole external world held no power to refute it in any meaningful way?

Dr. Reilly spun around a little in his chair. “Hmm. Yeah, I suppose it’s possible.”

There was silence. I didn’t know what to say.

“Let me ask you.” He spun his chair back to its original position. “Do you believe I’m real? Me, sitting in front of you?”

“Yes, mainly. At least, I hope.”

“Well, how can you be so sure about that?” he asked. “I could be Dr. Reilly’s identical twin. We could be plotting to deceive you by taking turns each session.”

I cocked my head back a little, perplexed. “Well, I guess I can’t. But it probably would become obvious that something was up at some point.”

“Why would it have to become obvious? We could be pulling off the most successful bait-and-switch trick in history.”

“That seems a bit unlikely.” This was different from the way my mom talked to me.

Dr. Reilly smirked a little. “But not impossible, right?”

I started to get an idea of where he might be going with this. “Why would you be doing it? It seems like a pretty elaborate thing to do for no reason.”

“For the same reason that the Simulators do what they do. Just to deceive you, I suppose.”

I thought back to the images that would intrude into my mind of what it would be like at the end of the simulation. The first option is that I would die and wake up in a lab in some higher universe, where the simulators would reveal to me that my life had always been a lie. The second option would be that the people around me one day would reveal the simulation for what it was, to my face. Either way, I was terrified. I felt deception on that scale to be a fate worse than death.

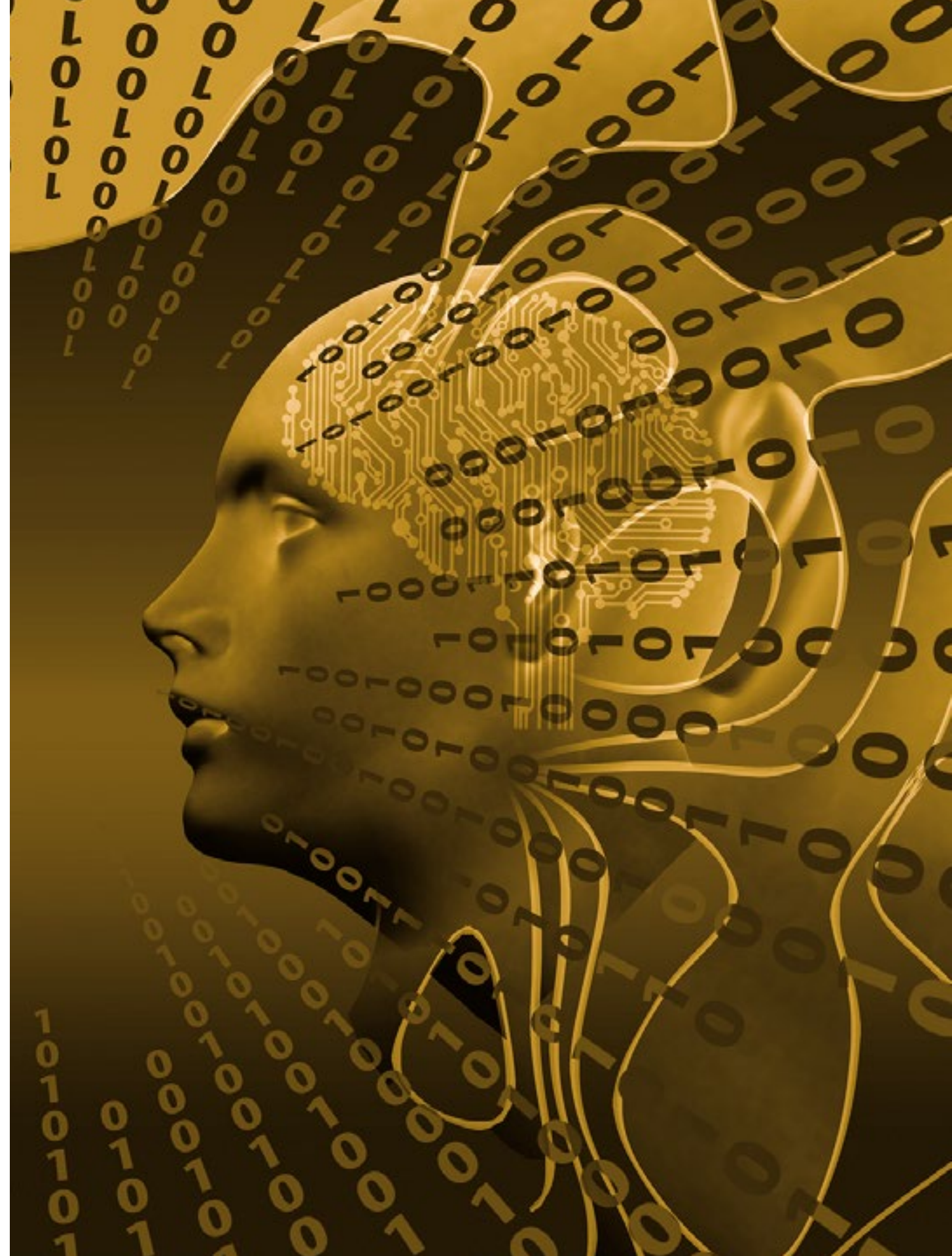
I spoke again. “Well, maybe the simulators have some higher goal in mind. Maybe I’m part of some test.”

“Or maybe I’m the one testing you, right now” Dr. Reilly fired back. “Maybe I work for a large, secret company, collecting data from the trial of your life for my experiment.”

I looked down, drawing a blank.

“But let’s back up for a bit,” he said. “So if you believe that the Simulators are using you for an experiment that means you do believe there are some real people, or beings, out there, right? Otherwise, what purpose would these experiments serve in the first place? It would probably be a situation where the ‘results’ could have an impact on their world, right?”

I nodded. “Yeah, I certainly can’t rule that out.”



Dr. Reilly raised a hand to his chin. “Yeah, there is a lot we can’t rule out. But, anyway, in this world of ‘beings’, the ones supposedly creating these human simulations for their own particular ends, whatever they may be, can you honestly say with no room for doubt that you are as ‘real’ as these beings from on high?”

I was transfixed. I really wanted to know where this was going. “So, are you asking if I’m real?”

Dr. Reilly swiveled his chair towards me, this time cocking his eyebrow in a clearly performative way. “Well, are you?”

I smiled a bit. “Uh, I feel real.”

“Yeah, but how do you know those feelings are real?”

At this point I was thoroughly lost. “Because I feel them. There are inside of me.”

“I see,” Dr. Reilly said with a resolve in his voice. “So everything that you feel inside is real, while everything you see outside is not?”

I was being led into another trap. I paused. Dr. Reilly broke the silence: “You know that feelings are a product of the brain, correct?”

“Yeah.”

“Then have you ever considered that perhaps you’re under a different kind of simulation?” My eyes widened a little. “One where you may not have a real human body at all? Who’s to say your experience of having a body, of having feelings, isn’t just as much programming as the things you see? Who’s to say you’re not simply a brain hooked up to a machine in a laboratory far, far away?”

Once again, I had been left speechless.



It’s difficult to point to a decisive moment where I can definitively say that things got better, but eventually they did. Zoloft hadn’t been working very well anymore, so the second psychiatrist I had started seeing prescribed me Prozac in its place. Every week I continued my appointments with Dr. Reilly, where the Socratic dialogue would rage on. While I know that the sound reasoning he provided helped me a lot, as the months went on, I found that the experience of simply being able to talk about these things openly was reassuring for me in their own capacity. It helped with my overall sense of alienation, and it helped break some of the feedback loops of unchecked panic and rumination.



There was also the internet. It wasn’t too long after I had begun seeing Dr. Reilly that I began scouring the internet for anything and everything that involved simulations, holograms, false realities etc. One of the main consolations, both from Dr. Reilly and from Wikipedia, was how when it came to my doubt in the material reality of the external world, it became increasingly clear that I had been beaten to the punch. Pyrrho of Elis, Sextus Empiricus, Nagarjuna, Rene Descartes, David Hume, Zhuangzi, and many others had all raised questions about the trustworthiness of our senses long before I had ever arrived on the scene. It wouldn’t be until later that it began to dawn on me that many of the same thought experiments or hypotheticals that would arise in my sessions with Dr. Reilly had already been debated vigorously for hundreds of years, as exemplified by the Evil Demon scenario put forward



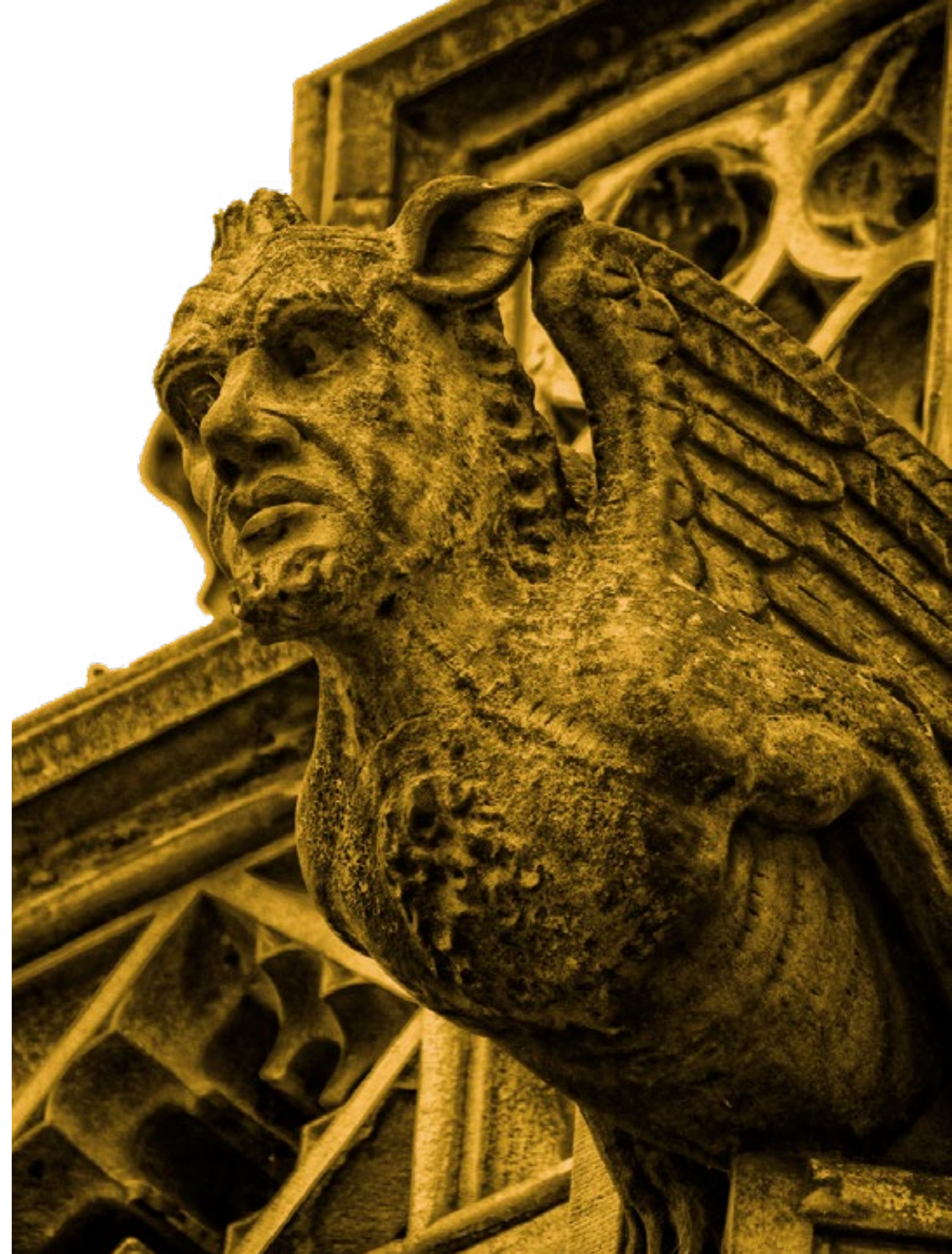
by Descartes or Zhuangzi's butterfly dream. At its core, the idea that there is no way to disprove the notion that our observations of the external world are not reliable due to subjective perception, and therefore there being no way to disprove the possibility that the universe could be a simulation, is anything but new. Realizing that put me at ease and left me with a desire to learn even more. From that point onward, I made the decision that philosophy was going to be an important part of my life.

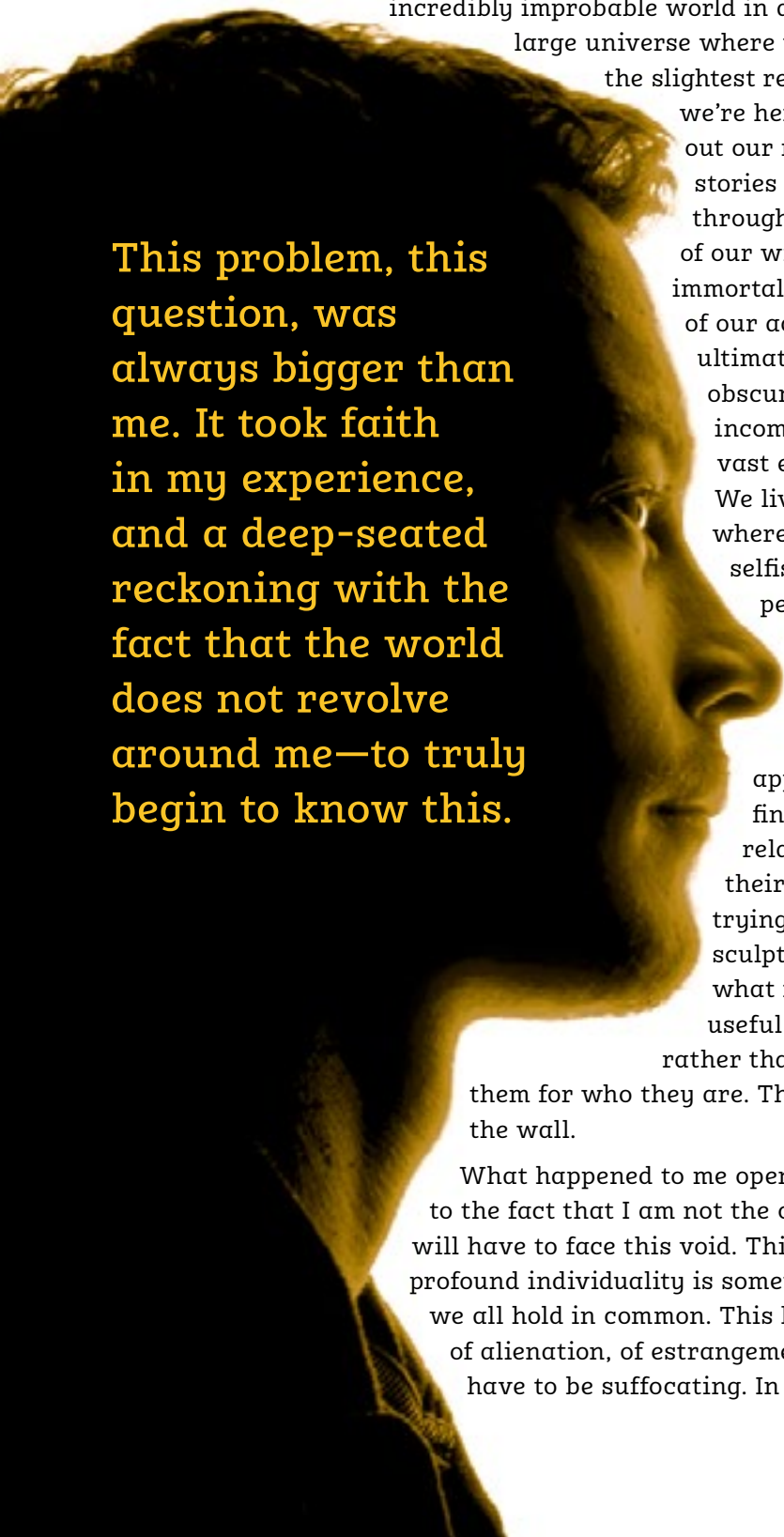
However, just exploring the ideas themselves wasn't enough. When it comes to clinging to unfalsifiable beliefs, the kind that you can never completely disprove, logical argument alone won't do.

Sooner or later, I began to think more critically about the people around me, as well as the means by which I relate to them. I remembered what I felt that day in the driveway, watching my mom and cousins talking and doing what they were doing. I remembered the experience I had just prior to when things started to go wrong; that feeling of interconnectedness, of wonder arising from a newly-realized awareness and insight into the minds of others. I became more conscious of their consciousness, and more keen to the implications of such an awareness.

Deep down, I realized the limitations of what I could know. I realized that nobody can ever be completely understood, and that no matter how much we observe each other, talk to each other, or spend time with each other, there will always be some wall that separates my experience from theirs. Hitting this wall for the first time was disheartening, and I couldn't help but feel trapped under its shadow. If I can't feel your internal world firsthand, how can I ever truly know it's there?

It took some time for me to realize what I needed. I never did arrive at an absolute answer; no logical resolution that put the whole question to rest within a moment, once and for all. It was a gradual process that involved the development of my individual judgement, empathy, and, more generally, faith. This does not necessarily mean having faith in the existence of a creator per se, but of a more basic kind: faith in there being something,





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anything at all, out there beyond yourself, something often taken for granted until it's not. Every one of us is living within the same absurdity: we are born into an incredibly improbable world in an incalculably large universe where we haven't the slightest real idea of why we're here. We live out our roles in the stories we create, and through the imposition of our will we vie for immortality in vain, all of our accomplishments ultimately swept into obscurity over an incomprehensibly vast expanse of time. We live in a world where many love selfishly and where people are also routinely used by one another to soothe their personal appetites. People find themselves in relationships with their projections, trying in vain to sculpt a person into what it would be useful for them to be, rather than appreciating them for who they are. They, too, will hit the wall.

What happened to me opened my eyes to the fact that I am not the only one who will have to face this void. This inescapable, profound individuality is something that we all hold in common. This basic sense of alienation, of estrangement—it doesn't have to be suffocating. In fact, it can be

liberating. Perhaps this basic freedom, as well as its accompanying responsibility, is the spring by which all else, including that primordial existential anxiety, flows. What I didn't understand then was that just because I was alone, I didn't have to feel alone.

I found faith in connection. I found solace in the others who had struggled as I had, unable to sleep because their thoughts kept them up at night. I let the heart-wrenching bends of the cello of the Adagietto of Mahler's 5th pull me into its captivating lull, feeling as immersed into someone else's experience as I believed I ever could be. I knew in time that I was not the only one to break from their trust of reality. Whether it be by psychosis, delusional disorder, paranoid schizophrenia, or some other diagnosis, it became clear as I learned more that there were many people out there who had developed issues similar to mine—or worse, would probably doubt or deny my existence in the same way that I would have doubted theirs. This problem, this question, was always bigger than me. It took faith in my experience, and a deep-seated reckoning with the fact that the world does not revolve around me—to truly begin to know this.

In the end, I felt gratitude. I felt thankful for my mother, who did everything she could to help me get through that difficult time. I felt thankful for my sister and friends, who were always understanding. I felt thankful for my father, who did the best he could for me. I felt thankful for my ability to speak, my ability to relate my thoughts and feelings to those close to me, and I felt thankful for the ability to listen. I felt thankful for music, for art, for everything that affirmed and validated that deep-seated aloneness we all share. I felt thankful for my freedom as an individual, and thankful for my world: one among many. Besides, if in the infinitesimally small possibility that I was right all along—that it all indeed turned out to be one big deception, one big lie in the end—I don't think I'd regret a thing. I would have lived in the best way that I knew how, and honestly, I think that's good enough for me.