

# The Categorical Imperative

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Book Three of the Noumenal Realm Trilogy

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*Sapere aude!*

(Dare to think for yourself!)

– Immanuel Kant



PLEASE READ

Thank you for taking the time to read this message. Please continue reading to the end, no matter what. It is urgent.

Is this message really meant for you? Yes, it is.

Please let us assure you that this message could not have been delivered to anyone else. We very carefully arranged for you to receive it at this moment. You will come to understand just how and why at the end of the mission you volunteered for.

Did you volunteer for a mission? Yes, you did.

The most important thing we need to convey to you is that you will not remember volunteering for the mission. This is because the mission involves memory transplant.

Does this mean that we have replaced your old memories with new memories? Yes, it does.

“But how is that possible?” you may be asking yourself. You are probably used to thinking of your memories as a permanent part of you—something that could never be taken away.

But if you think about it more carefully, you will see how inaccurate this understanding is. Over the course of your life, millions of new memories replace old memories each day. Can a fifteen-year-old remember what he or she did on New Year’s Day at the age of three? Absolutely not.

The mind is like a computer chip that stores data. We have simply replaced old data with new data.

The first step in your orientation for this mission is for you to get used to the fact that you don’t know your true past.

Does this mean that at least some of the people and events that your memories are about don't really exist? Yes, it does.

The second step in your orientation is for you to get used to the fact that you are currently experiencing a virtual reality. Take a moment to notice everything around you—the light, the room, the floor, your own body, and the very paper on which this message is printed.

Are these things real? No, they are not.

It should not surprise you that we have the technology to create this illusion. Think of virtual reality as an intensive video game that creates not just sights and sounds but tastes, smells, and textures. By textures, we mean that we can create the illusion of the smooth, brown surface of the paper on which this message is printed, even though the paper is not really here.

Take a moment to examine this paper. All your senses tell you that it has physical existence. Yet we assure you that it does not. If you have trouble believing this, think about how your senses work. When you touch the paper, nerves in your fingers send information to your mind. Our technology can send information to your mind just as easily as your senses do.

At this point you may be checking your head for the hidden electrodes we must have attached to it for sending sensory information to your mind. If so, you have the right idea. But you won't find any electrodes.

Recall that everything you are currently experiencing is only virtual. This includes your own body. Go ahead and give your body a poke. It feels just as real as the paper, right? Of course it does. We can send sensory information about

your body directly to your mind, even if your body doesn't really exist.

Is everything you are perceiving right now an illusion? Yes, it is.

At least, insofar as you think that your perception concerns a physical world, it is completely false. Insofar as you understand that it concerns a virtual world, however, it is completely true.

Think of it this way: everything you are experiencing is virtually real, but it is not physically real in any way.

Let's review what we have established so far.

- You have been supplied with an artificial set of memories.
- You are being supplied with artificial experiences.

These two steps add up to the third and final step in this orientation: You need to get used to the fact that you do not know who you really are.

Is there anything you can know for certain about yourself or the real world during the mission? No, there is not.

Now that you fully understand your situation, you may feel the need to know who we are and what the mission is all about. Why would you volunteer for it? How long will it go on?

We cannot answer any of these questions without compromising the integrity of the mission. Suffice it to say that we have good reasons, and everything will turn out for the best in the end.

Can you trust us? Yes, you can.

We will reveal as much about your mission as we can as soon as possible. In the meantime, try to act naturally—as naturally as you can, knowing what you now know.

We strongly recommend against telling anyone about this message. No one is likely to believe you anyway.

Thank you again, and best wishes.



# 1

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“Does this message look familiar to you?” The person speaking was Aaron Ronbon, the Assistant Director of the New Smithsonian Foundation. Bald and with a pencil tucked above his left ear, he wore a crisp white lab coat. He was referring to the message on brown paper. He was projecting a picture of it on a screen at the front of the classroom.

I looked around. There were only two other kids in the room. They were nodding. They each held up a brown envelope.

“Roslyn?” Ronbon cocked an eyebrow at me.

I dug through my bookbag, found my brown envelope, and held it up. I’d been carrying it around for months now. Ronbon already knew I had one. I figured he wanted me to show it so that the other two kids—middle schoolers like me whom I’d never met before—would know that I was in the same boat as they were.

Ronbon’s face was grim. “I want you to understand that no one here at the New Smithsonian Foundation sent you this message. In fact, I received it myself. And so did the director of the Foundation, Dr. Mace Smithson. At the end of our summer school program in June, we found out that a number of our students had received it. We have been researching it. We think we know what it means.”

The anxiety in the air was thick enough to cut.

“During this week-long conference,” Ronbon continued, “we’d like to share with you our theory about the message and complete the mission it refers to once and for all.”

I couldn't believe I was back at the Smithsonian Castle in Washington, D.C. When I had caught sight of it across the National Mall as my mother had driven me in that morning, my heart had leapt. Red brick, arched windows, turrets, towers, flags, and a sculpted garden, it struck me as the most noble building in the United States.

James Smithson donated the money for the Smithsonian Institution in 1846 "for the increase and diffusion of knowledge." His great-great-great-great-great-grandson Mace Smithson was unhappy with the "museum" interpretation of this charge. He established the New Smithsonian Foundation in the basement of the Castle to try to move the Institution away from the "endless collection of junk" in favor of research into the nature of reality.

So much had changed since I had been here in June. Less than a month ago, it had felt like a different life.

One of the other kids, a boy in a blue hoodie, raised his hand. "Is the mission connected to the Disappearance Catastrophe?"

Ronbon nodded. "We believe that our mission may in fact be our only hope for putting an end to it."

The Catastrophe. My previous training with the New Smithsonian Foundation (a day-long demo in April and a week of summer school in June) should have prepared me for the Catastrophe. But it didn't. Nothing can really prepare you for the disappearance of the physical world.

It didn't *all* disappear. Actually, that would have been much easier to take. It was disappearing piece by piece, all over the country, all over the world.

At first it was only happening to human-made things. For example, my laptop and my toothbrush disappeared. Other people reported other things disappearing, such as chairs,

clothing, and even whole cars. Scientists theorized that it was some kind of quantum anomaly. They looked for a common denominator in the disappearances. Then people's dogs and cats started to go missing. And then people.

If you watch the news, you'll hear a lot about the dominant theory: that aliens from outer space are pillaging our planet. I guess that's possible. But I have a feeling...well, anyone who received the message in the brown envelope will have to see it as a confirmation that we are living in a virtual reality and that some major glitch in the program is occurring.

When it first started happening, I hunkered down with everybody else. We braced ourselves for the worst. A few things would disappear from each person's life every day. Nothing crucial, but still.... My mom and I were terrified. We watched in horror as the news started reporting people with missing loved ones.

Initially I didn't want to think about how the Catastrophe might be connected to the message in the brown envelope. But I finally told my mom about it. Just as the message said, she didn't want to believe it. But then I received the summons from Dr. Smithson. It was pretty stark:

*Roslyn Hart:*

*Please report to the Smithsonian Castle for a week-long New Smithsonian Foundation conference starting at 8 am on July 10th.*

The minute I received the summons, I texted Jonah Ziv. I had met him at the Foundation's simulation demo at my school, and we became friends during the following summer school program.

When he didn't text back, I figured—I hoped—it was just that his phone had disappeared. As soon as I could convince

my mom to let me go, I ran to his house and knocked on his door. His parents were in shock. He had disappeared.

Since the moment I found that out, I've felt different somehow on the inside. How could it be? Jonah had received the message in the brown envelope, too. And he is the realest person I have ever known. Did Jonah's disappearance mean that he had just been part of the simulation? I didn't want to believe it. And what about my mom? Was she next?

She didn't want to let me come back to the Castle. But after the first week, the disappearances started to slow down. And she needed to come to D.C. anyway to be with her brother, my uncle, whose wife disappeared.

The worst part about this whole Catastrophe has been the discovery that not all the people around you are really people. It's just like living in a video game, where some of the characters are "player-characters"—that is, avatars for real people—and others aren't. Except that in this game, you don't know who is a player-character and who isn't.

I started to wonder whether maybe I was just part of the simulation, ready to pop out of existence at any moment. But then I realized that that's impossible. You actually have to be conscious in order to wonder whether you are conscious. So if you're wondering right now, then you're safe—you're not just part of the simulation.

Everyone you meet, of course, will act like they're conscious—and tell you that they are, if you ask. But you can't necessarily believe them because a non-player-character could easily be programmed to lie.

Jonah sure seemed conscious to me. But I guess that's how good the program is. Whoever programmed it must be really, really intelligent. They should be able to fix the glitch soon. On the other hand, now that we know the whole thing

is just a simulation, what's the point? It kind of changes everything.

Suppose they fixed the glitch and restored everything tomorrow. Could I go back to my life as usual? Would I want to be Jonah's girlfriend, knowing that he is non-player-character?

I suppose you *could* argue that it's the same difference to someone like me who's good at pretending....

But ultimately, I mean, no *freaking* way. It would be like making out with a blow-up doll or something. Downright creepy.

So at this point, I have to tell you, I'm just a little ticked off. Because I really liked Jonah. I want to know: Who made this stupid game? Who all are the player-characters? And when can we be done?

Because when it comes to life, I want the real thing.