Pluto

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Of the elements in the human body, potassium is the most expensive with a market value of $1000 dollars per kilogram. Sulfur follows at half value; phosphorus half that. Adding to them oxygen, carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, calcium, sodium, chlorine, magnesium, iron, iodine, and a tableful of trace elements, the chemical worth of a person totals a consistent $5.00, adjusted for inflation. Multiplied by the estimated population and momentarily disregarding the fact that things cost different amounts in different places, the summative value of the human race totals a sheepish $38 billion. Self-consciously accounting for career achievements, long-term capital investment, and average lifetime contribution to GDP, humanity has managed to raise its price tag somewhat. The US. Office of Management and Budget sets the value of an individual at $7 million USD. The Environmental Protection Agency, somewhat self-defeatingly, reports a higher $9.1 million, while the FDA sets an understandably lower bar for distribution at $6 million. These valuations, while reassuring, present troubling inconsistencies. Given the economic rather than atomic context, averages tend to vary haphazardly between persons, with certain individuals producing far more pillow cases and plastic aglets than predicted, and others consuming far too little tupperware. Some lead urban development campaigns, erecting edifices for the odd purpose of sheltering people in an affordable manner, and some transplant thirty-seven (or more) carotid arteries every few years -- both valuable risk management assets -- while others disrupt and destroy perfectly operational assets in the name of “social justice,” though the market worth of such a concept has yet to be determined. Thin-spectacled illustrators, lyricists, and literarians magnify these quantification issues. While sheaves, ink, and all things “e-” have their value to publishers, economy considers neither progressive nor regressive socio-cultural impact and T.S Eliot’s “Fire Sermon” is only worth its longest line. Even in death inconsistencies remain. Consider that the death or killing of an individual results in a net negative contribution to a community’s worth and is labeled “unfortunate.” The death or killing of many increases arms production, Smith & Wesson stock, and the velocity of political donations, yet also contributes a net negative and is labeled “a-tragedy-it’s-a-complicated-issue.” The killing of the uncountable, however, boosts the economy across all levels, not just arms production, generates investment in education and the nation, contributes a net positive, and is labeled “defense.” Substituting in order, the ratio of virtuous deeds per villainous, long-term cultural investment, and social and moral capital, the ethical viewpoint works to resolve economic limitations by doing away with quantification entirely in favor of qualification. Communities possess heroes and villains with most statuses determined relative to each other. ​Caesar, Hamlet, their lance-rattling author, “Starman,” “Shields on the River Tyne,” and hosts more properly categorize as heroic investigators of the human condition. The letter writing King with a legacy far past Birmingham, the grape worker who said yes it could be done, and the Indian woman who faced down an army, then a country, constitute its defenders. Villains, none of whom will be

here named, become a more sensible opponent to demonize (rather than say, the impoverished) because whatever wealth they possess no longer relieves them of their moral burdens. Removal of economic worth means for villains, murder remains murder regardless of number, and capital exploitation a matter of justice rather than permissibility. Their first names are slashed so their last can be demonified, crucified, and adjectified without the clunkiness or dignity of a full epithet. This too, fails. Gains in holism come at the expense of clarity, leaving all the flawed and fractured heroes, the real world Punishers and Jasons of the Argo, scattered in a spectrum where only two classifications exist. The whistleblowers, the kneebenders, the hellraisers, the non-royal Martin Luthers; the John Browns, the Guy Fawkes’s, and the Robin Hoods: virtue sometimes comes tangled with vice and vanity. The classical conflict between deontological and teleological morality, whether to arrest Jean Valjean for rye-theft or let him go to feed his family, begins to pick away at the distinctions. The dichotomies unravel, and one must abruptly deal with the concept of heroes and less heroes, villains and just villains. Factor in the local, everyday supers -- the garbage men, the unsocial social workers, the statistics teachers (bless their commitment), the lunch-sharers, the hand-shakers, the late homework co-concealers, the dads, their dads, the moms, the other moms, the “just him”s, the “just her”s -- and the ethical perspective dilutes to an aerated puddle. All metrics, all attempts at measuring, classifying, categorizing humanity break down. Regardless, people attempt to do so, for the same reason that they were not satisfied with their worth-by-element: vanity. Put less cynically: simple pride. We’d like to think we can build scandent skyscrapers that scrape at God, fix the forests and fens we fell, color the air and the earth just as richly as we color our canvases. Rather than a matter of context, the very premise of appraising human worth is flawed by human inconsistency. We don’t obey rules very well, yet, we like things organized, scrunched up into little boxes that we understand. From this contradiction, coupled with curiosity, we gave rise to our own enemy: abstraction. I’d like to believe some beginnings were innocuous, that we simply wanted a way to gauge how far we’d come as a species. We looked at our stone things, then our bronze things, our metal swords, then our metal towers, and somewhere along the way the little scratching at the back of our heads -- the same one that told us to look through a telescope and write things that didn’t make sense if you read them literally -- made us take a hard look at our collection of goods and services. The numbers soared higher than any Babel, and some marveled at the heights of affluence accumulated. Others stood, arms spent, heads craning, craning. To make the numbers higher we abstractified further, and out came securities, uncertain futures, margin trading, and trading away marginal safety. We consumed our oil things, our mass media things, our rampant commercialization things. Others sat, arms limp, heads down, down. Some beginnings were not. Some abstractions humans created, we created, because they simplified peoples, places, and practices. We didn’t have to understand fully, because we understood what we wanted. We stuffed entire nations into boxes called, black, white, yellow,

red, first, third, developing and shelved them for easy access. Words became labels and we attached them to the concepts we feared, the people we exploited, the subjects we suppressed. Abstractify, abstractify, and the black man became an incarceration rate. Abstractify, abstractify, and the oman became a womb. Abstractify, then ignore, and the poor became statistical cannon fodder for politicians and high school debate clubs to take and beat their opponents over the head with. We praise the hubristic, macrocosmic viewpoint, that overarching omniscient view we used to attribute to deities, because it satisfies at once both our pride and our curiosity. My neighbor is Hispanic I think, my second cousin is gay, I eat vegan sometimes, and I understand people. African-Americans are discriminated against or something, women don’t get enough money, not all Asians like math, and I understand my nation. Don’t emit carbon (whatever that is), don’t smoke, vaccines are controversial I guess, and I understand science. Jamaica is reggae and bauxite, North Korea a failed state, Mexico a cartel, and I understand the world. Then I smile, or sneer at the blank faces, because I don’t use the n-word, I don’t call people chink because that’s rude, because I use paper bags when I remember, and because I listen to females when I have the time. Those who make the conscious effort to remain bigoted, remain racist or classist are on the decline. Rare is the time that a person will spit in a face and say it is because he or she hates its color, or its physiology. The more common intolerance of abstraction is substituting “intellectual” understanding for experience then shrieking, ears plugged, that they are the same I can write, looking in, about feminism, but I cannot write feminism, hopelessly male as I am. I can intellectually comprehend the struggle for gender equality in the same way I can tell you that plants utilize solar energy for the creation of glucose through electron transferring photosynthesis (noun, five syllables), all the while not understanding exactly what it feels like to swallow sunlight and lift lightning. There, in the experience and its insidious scars, lies the break between “irrespective of the level of qualification, jobs predominantly done by women pay less on average than jobs predominantly done by men” (IWPR 2017) and having not only competence, but my capacity decided by which reproductive function I may or may not perform in my lifetime, or between “young black men were killed by police at a sharply higher rate than other Americans in 2016, intensifying concerns over the expected abandonment of criminal justice reform” (Swaine 2017) and watching my people, my family, myself disappear over and over again. We now fight a war not against one oppressor or one set of societal norms, but against systemic abstraction. We fight against the reduction of living, breathing people to numbers, the amount of metal they can purchase, and what a whitewashed history expects of them. Leave the broad, sweeping views, and the statistical analyses only where they are needed, where they serve their purpose as tools rather than definitions. Stop pretending to understand and instead accept that you never will. Embrace the impossible task, and remind yourself every second that what you understand is only a sliver of a sliver of a truth. Shed complacency, the arrogance of models

and their numbers. Look instead at the stupid, careless, fallible people as they carve beauty out of an impossible, gasping heap of contradictions and chaos. This is how the protest begins, with countless, concrete individuals, one of whom is a Korean-American male, 170lbs, 5’ 11”. He eats rice not because he is Asian but because his family eats rice and he quite likes the taste. He dislikes math, but sees beauty in the normal curve and spinning graphs around axes to make odd spiral shapes. He loves Neil Gaiman, James Joyce, Teju Cole, and George Orwell (when he’s not being homophobic), and he only remembered he loved them because someone reminded him a year ago. He believes history repeats itself and that there is artistry in the movement of time. He believes in God, Jesus, and Matthew 7:5. He doesn’t think that precludes him from loving the people who don’t. He thinks his countries, both of them, all of them, are putrefying, and he is both infuriated and hopeful for reform. Who are you? Thing is, we won’t really know until you tell us.