

PHILOSOPHY IN THE CYPHER SYSTEM



*Requires the Cypher System Rulebook from Monte Cook Games.
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PHILOSOPHY IN THE CYPHER SYSTEM

By Matt Schutt

INTRODUCTION

"For my own part, I don't lack the courage to think a thought whole. No thought has frightened me so far."

-- Soren Kierkegaard

"As it is not the animal but man alone who thinks, so also he alone has freedom – and only because he thinks."

-- Georg Hegel

"Thinking is what we already know we have not yet begun."

-- Jacques Derrida

"The delight I take in my thoughts is delight in my own strange life. Is this joy of living?"

-- Ludwig Wittgenstein

In role-playing games, you get sexy ninjas, gun-toting dinosaurs, nuclear-powered '57 Chevys, and time travelers who bounce back and forth through the centuries in search of wine, women, and song. In philosophy, you get long, complicated arguments about the definition of the word "being." So there's a disconnect between the two bodies of thought, is what we're saying.

And yet philosophy is a skill option in the Cypher System. You can look it up for yourself. It's right there on page 20 of The Tome. A player might find it difficult to justify spending a training "slot" for philosophy when he still needs Jumping, Climbing, Kicking Ass, Taking Names, Driving Like A Maniac, and other RPG necessities.

Two options present themselves. First, the GM may allow a PC to be trained in philosophy as a free background skill. (See page 232 of The Tome.) The character majored in philosophy in college, spent some years in a religious retreat, or maybe just has an intuitively philosophical mind. In this case, the character can be considered trained when interacting with professors, politicians, poets, and pundits. Every once in a while, the skill might justify a free insight into a moral quandary or social predicament.



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The second option requires the player to spend a training "slot" in philosophy and then choose a particular philosophy to be trained in. The bulk of this article details some sample philosophies. The idea behind this option is that your character has more than just a passing knowledge of philosophy. He *believes*. He believes in his chosen philosophy so hard that he is considered trained in certain tasks that dovetail with his philosophy's tenets. The philosophy samples in this article give examples of suitable task uses.

This second option can be taken a step further in some campaigns by saying a character's beliefs are so strong and so innate that he can nudge reality itself into doing what he wants. We will refer to this character as a "true believer." To be a true believer, the character must already have one level of training in his chosen philosophy and then spend another training slot in it. In effect, instead of becoming specialized in the philosophy, he becomes a true believer.

The true believer gains a philosophical power called a dynamo and a philosophical disadvantage called a malison. This is a package deal. If you take the dynamo, you also get the malison. (That's called game balance, bitches.) The philosophies described in this article have concomitant dynamos and malisons but they must be approved by the GM before you can take them.

One could make the claim that the philosophies described herein are just another version of RPG alignments, just a little more sophisticated (cynical?) than your normal Law/Chaos and Good/Evil dichotomies. Sure. You could also compare them to mental disadvantages in other games but be it known that a follower of the categorical imperative, for example, is not honest and lawful because of a character flaw. She is honest and lawful because she has thought through all of the consequences of dishonesty and lawlessness and thus voluntarily chooses the categorical imperative. Philosophies are not inherited from fate, culture, or biology. The same idea translates to the players themselves. If they do not wish for their characters to have philosophies, the GM should not push the issue.

No philosophy can hope to capture the totality of all existence. Every philosophy contains logical inconsistencies and emotional ironies. Each entry below has an example of dissonance, a way in which your philosophy falls short or

simply falls apart. Whether or not your character owns up to the dissonance is up to you.

Many of the following philosophies have had their names changed to protect the innocent and some of them never existed in the first place. There's no such thing as chic nihilism or paraesthetics. So why introduce philosophy into RPGs in the first place? Well, we believe it serves no purpose to pretend that RPGs are not the thinking man's entertainment. RPGs are all about ideas and as such, it behooves us to make those ideas loftier, headier, more potent. To paraphrase Socrates, the unexamined adventure is not worth running.

THE PHILOSOPHIES

Apostasy: Our most cherished beliefs are lies.

Ascetix: Enlightenment through suffering.

Categorical Imperative: Morality comes through reason and only reason.

Chic Nihilism: A fashionable sort of pessimism.

De Sanguinem Mysterius: Morality comes through emotion and only emotion.

Hedonism: Pleasure is the purpose of life.

Maxim Sodality: It is far better to have order than happiness.

Mythopoetic License: Heed the collective unconscious.

Neo-Panglossia: Grim optimism.

Pacifism: Violence is not the answer.

Panpsychism: The entire universe is all of one mind.

Paraesthetics: Beauty is in the mind of the beholder.

Quantum Anarchy: Chaos, chaos, chaos. And more chaos.

Statistical Process Control: The universe is mathematically determinable.

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Storm and Stress Heroica: Heroes created civilization. Believe it, peasant.

The Manifesto: You know what this one is, comrade.

Transcendental Solipsism: The mind is more important than matter.

Ultima Rule: The search for Eternal Truth.

Weird Realism: The universe is strange and unfathomable.

Yinyangism: Reality is made of competing but complementary forces.

Zeitgeisty: People are different and that's a good thing.

APOSTASY

"It is dangerous to be right in matters on which the established authorities are wrong."

-- Voltaire

"Maybe you who condemn me are in greater fear than I who am condemned."
--Giordano Bruno

Apostasy is a meticulously thought out form of blasphemy. It is the official renunciation of the most cherished ideals of a nation, religion, or culture. To be an apostate in America is to renounce democracy and freedom. To be an apostate in Ireland is to speak ill of the Catholic Church. To be an apostate in Boston is to tell jokes at the expense of the Red Sox. So what is apostasy in the Cypher System? It is to reject cyphers.

No matter what the campaign's genre is, the apostate claims that cyphers inflict much more harm than good on a society. In some worlds, the apostate might be right. Cyphers can be used to oppress people and are the main tools of the bandit classes (i.e., adventurers). Experiments with cyphers could have wrought terrible catastrophes in the past and threaten civilization in the present. But some apostates have a problem with cyphers on purely theoretical grounds. They believe that humanity should be self-reliant, not dependent on gadgets or magic items.

Most communities frown on apostasy at the very least. They may tolerate an apostate to exist but they will not allow that apostate to proselytize in public or attempt to convert others to his cause. He might find it difficult to keep friends and jobs. Some governments may explicitly forbid apostasy and will strip the offender's rights. An apostate's children will be taken away, his marriage dissolved, and so on. The most extreme nations will imprison or even execute apostates.

On a personal level, you enjoy being the heretic. You cheerfully admonish your allies for their reliance on potions, pills, powders, or prayers. You love it when a crowd gathers for your demonstration at which you burn scrolls or smash smartphones. Until they start throwing rocks, that is.

Dissonance: For an institution to retain its hold on a culture, it sometimes needs an enemy to fight against, a scapegoat to blame. By trying to fight it, are you making the institution stronger?

Skill Use: Ironically, you have an intimate knowledge of cyphers. You are trained in finding and identifying cyphers.

Dynamo: *Cypher Resistance.* You have an Armor rating equal to your tier that works against any attack initiated by a cypher, no matter the type. Enabler.

Malison: *Cypher Anathema.* You may never use cyphers. If you ever use a cypher, accidentally or not, you lose all the benefits of apostasy for one game month.

ASCETIX

"The wealth required by nature is limited and is easy to procure, but the wealth required by the vain ideals extends to infinity."

-- Epicurus

"Take me and throw me where you will: I am indifferent. You cannot separate me from my spirit."

-- Marcus Aurelius

The soul is more important than the flesh. When the flesh suffers, the soul soars. And that's all you really need to know.

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You discovered this revelation from the study of extinct religions or from a late-night infomercial guru or perhaps a drug-fueled personal epiphany. Since then, you have renounced material goods and physical pleasures, almost to the point of absurd masochism. You wear tattered robes that do nothing to protect your body from the elements. You travel from city to city, relying on begging and foraging to keep you in sustenance. Some days, you might only eat grass. And that's just your day-to-day routine.

For special occasions, or for rituals of atonement or enlightenment, you will perform yoga on a bed of nails, meditate for hours under a waterfall or at the top of a tall pillar in the wilderness, spend the evening in a snowdrift or in a jungle cave with crawling vermin, chain yourself to the prow of a ship, or lock yourself up in a sensory deprivation tank for days.

Some followers of the ascetix movement are snake handlers and starvation artists. Other followers walk through the city streets wearing heavy chains whilst reciting holy texts or working through mathematical problems out loud. Others will etch the sagas of their ancestors into their own skin. They don't really bother with suicidal acts such as self-immolation, however, as a dead thing no longer feels pain.

All in all, a specialized lifestyle.

Dissonance: Extreme ascetix can be seen as the ultimate narcissism and an attention-getting ploy by those who want to appear as spiritually superior to the "chattel."

Skill Use: You are trained in intimidation and other fear-based interactions. You are also trained in any challenge to resist torture.

Dynamo: *Masochismo.* Your body has now adapted to the point that it receives an almost religious ecstasy from pain. Whenever you take a number of points of damage greater than your current tier, you receive an asset to any Speed or Intellect challenge you make the following round. And yes, you can voluntarily inflict damage upon yourself in order to receive the asset. Enabler.

Malison: *Allergic to Happiness.* This philosophy has ruined you for the good life. Laughter makes you break out in hives and good cheer fills you with nausea. Whenever you are in situations in which a group of people are

engaged in good-natured frivolity (such as festivals, late-night revelries, or even campfire jokes), you are physically sickened and all tasks (not just social interactions) you take during the event have their difficulties moved one step to your detriment. If combat breaks out for whatever reason (hint, hint), this penalty goes away immediately.

CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE

"It is impossible to conceive anything at all in the world, or even out of it, which can be taken as good without qualification, except a good will."

-- Immanuel Kant

"The pendulum of the mind oscillates between sense and nonsense, not between right and wrong."

-- C.G. Jung

You could call this one the Gospel according to Spock. Reason, and not namby-pamby feelings, determines what is right and wrong. There is, in fact, a logical test for a moral action. Imagine if every person in society performed that action. If it is impossible, then that act is immoral. For example, murder is wrong because society would cease to exist if everybody committed murder.

You can extend this test to all human behaviors. Keeping your promises is moral because a civilization would be impossible if no one intended to keep their promises. The same can be said of laziness and miserliness. Helping others is moral because we all need help sometimes and society would collapse if all people refused to help each other.

A moral law is not relativistic; it does not change according to circumstances. A moral law applies to all times and all places. So it is not moral to kill someone and take the victim's kidney to save your dying spouse. It does not matter that your motive was a noble one. Each person is an end, not a means to an end and you cannot expect a rational person to voluntarily give up their kidney for a stranger. Highly irrational, my man.

On a personal level, the categorical imperative does not care about your happiness. Most often, obeying moral laws will make you miserable. But it is the thin philanthropies and the

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immature philosophies that want you to be happy. The categorical imperative says that it is your duty to be a moral agent. Nothing more, nothing less. If you feel good about giving to a charity, then you're doing it wrong.

Dissonance: A classic thought experiment asks whether or not it is moral to lie to a known murderer when he asks you where his next victim lives. If so, then telling the truth cannot be a universal law.

Skill Use: You are trained in logic and rational arguments.

Dynamo: *Improved Impart Ideal (3+ Intellect points)*. This dynamo works like the impart ideal ability for the second-tier speaker (see page 46 of The Tome) with one extra wrinkle. For each level of Effort you spend, you can affect one extra creature with the same suggestion. Action.

Malison: *Lack of Subjectivity*. You're a law and order man and will do everything in your power to make sure the people around you obey. But then, the "laws" you enforce will be arbitrary and petty. You might threaten an under-aged smoker with a gun. Prostitutes can walk by you with impunity but if someone spits on the sidewalk in front of you, woe to that poor soul. This malison gives you an inability in social interactions. It might also get you murdered by the other PCs. So beware.

CHIC NIHILISM

**"Boredom is nothing other than the sensation of the emptiness of existence."
--Arthur Schopenhauer**

**"One can only live while one is intoxicated with life; as soon as one is sober it is impossible not to see that it is all a mere fraud and a stupid fraud!"
--Leo Tolstoy**

The universe has no meaning or purpose. The concepts of absolute truth and moral law are frauds. Civilization at best is a hodgepodge set of codes that we are trained to obey like housebroken pets. People come from nothing and return to nothing, having understood (you guessed it) nothing.

But what the hell, right? That's no reason to get morose about it. Besides, the person who

succumbs to anhedonia is just a boring, mopey jerk. The trick is to know that life is a stupid joke and yet be hip to the joke, to strike an ironic pose in the face of ennui and despair, to give the abyss the middle finger.

In this meaningless circus that we call reality, there is only one thing worth taking seriously and that is style. You cannot be starved of style. You cannot have your style tortured out of you. Style is an innate part of your being. Style is the only aspect of our beings that continues to exist long after our death. Elvis may be dust but his style lives on. Individual style is more important than culture. A pair of spiffy boots is worth twenty Mona Lisas.

On a personal level, you can face any blood-freezing danger as long as your hair looks good while doing it. You can stare death in the face as long as you're looking through chic sunglasses. It might have been better for you to have never been born, but since you're here you might as well look good in that jacket.

Dissonance: A belief in nothing is not nothing. It is still a belief. Also, any individual style can be immediately stolen and codified by the bourgeois market.

Skill Use: It's hard to control someone who doesn't believe in anything. You are trained in any defense against mind control and propaganda.

Dynamo: *Jolly Pessimism*. Your blasé attitude about the horrors of life helps you recover from mental shocks and stress. You can roll a fifth recovery roll every day that takes only one round to initiate. However, this extra recovery roll can only be used to refill your Intellect Pool. Action.

Malison: *Morale Sink*. But often your pessimistic attitude comes off as caustic and demoralizing to your allies, both PCs and NPCs. Once per day, you will say or do something in a non-combat situation that sours the morale of anybody within immediate range. PCs can resist this effect with Intellect defense. The task difficulty is equal to your tier. Affected characters assume a "Why bother?" attitude and all of their task difficulties are moved one step to their detriment for one hour. Note that this effect automatically ends when a dangerous encounter occurs. Nothing like a life-threatening situation to snap you out of a funk.

DE SANGUINEM MYSTERIUS

“It is impossible to conceive why a man exempt from fears and desires should take the trouble to reason.”

-- Jean-Jacques Rousseau

“Waste no more time arguing about what a good man should be. Be one.”

-- Marcus Aurelius

If a person tells you in clinical terms that he is depressed, then we can only feel his depression in clinical terms. But if we see the depressed man's ashen face, see his tears and hear the catch in his voice, then we feel his sorrow. The same can be said of morality. If a man explains in a rational voice that he is good, do you believe him? No, your own empathy will tell you if he is good or not. We cannot have abstract principles of hatred and love. We can only feel these emotions in real life.

Truth is disputable, but not taste. Morality is beyond logic and reason. The good cannot be codified by scientific rules. But morality is still a universal sentiment, immediately perceived by all sane humans. Just like the exalted feelings of music, wit, and passion, morality might be immune to definition and yet we all know it when we feel it.

If we see, in our daily life, an example of cruelty, the wrongness of the action hits us in the guts. We don't need someone to logically explain to us that cruelty is wrong. We apprehend it automatically just like we know chocolate tastes good or that the Beatles sound sublime.

On a personal level, you avoid celibacy, fasting, self-denial and other monkish qualities because these false virtues serve no purpose in a lively society. You will be generous, friendly, and merciful to most people you meet. You will be keenly driven in gathering esteem and affection, while avoiding hatred and contempt.

Dissonance: But some sentiments are not universal. Some people might see the diplomatic man as a wishy-washy pushover.

Skill Use: You are skilled at sensing the emotional state of others.

Dynamo: Emotional Dynamo. You feed off the emotional state of others. If a PC or more than one NPCs are in an extreme emotional state (GM's call), you become obscenely energized. For every round that you spend in total concentration, performing no other actions except to revel in the raw emotion, you restore one point to the Pool of your choice. Action.

Malison: Emotional Chameleon. If you use the emotional dynamo ability for more than three rounds, you become taken over by the same emotion that you were feeding on. The GM then hits you with an Intrusion but does not award you any XP for it. The form of the Intrusion should reflect the emotional state. A good way to adjudicate it is to look at the disadvantage listed under the descriptor that fits the emotion. For example, if your philosopher was feeding off the fear of some NPCs and you become taken over by the fear yourself, the GM could say that you suffer one of the inabilities listed under the Craven descriptor.

HEDONISM

“The object of man's desire, is not to enjoy once only, and for one instant of time; but to assure forever the way of his future desire.”

-- Thomas Hobbes

“If the act of procreation were neither the outcome of a desire nor accompanied by feelings of pleasure but a matter to be decided on the basis of purely rational considerations, is it likely the human race would still exist?”

-- Arthur Schopenhauer

Life is all about avoiding pain and getting pleasure. All else is pedantry. But there is an important distinction between the true hedonist and a dumb animal. A hedonist knows that a short-lived pleasure can bring about long-term discomfort. Eating too much rich food in one sitting will give a person a terrible gut ache, the opposite of pleasure. So a hedonist practices moderation. A common proverb among hedonists is, “Honey is sweet but is it worth the bee sting?”

Hedonists know that pleasure is subjective. What pleases one sentient creature will illicit an incredulous stare in another. It's also important to know that sources of pleasure can come from higher purposes, such as poetry, mathematics,

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music, pure knowledge, and charity work. Many hedonists put most of their emphasis on friendship, because friendship is the one vice no person can get too much of.

Critics of hedonism dismiss it as a vapid way of life. They also say that it does not explain many aspects of human behavior. For instance, why does an adventurer put his life and limb, even his own sanity, at risk for the sake of a mere "discovery?" The hedonist would counter that some forms of pleasure are more esoteric than others.

On personal level, you love life. One of your greatest pleasures is introducing new pleasures to other folk. It makes you sad that a lot of people make their way through every day repeating the same numb habits, feeling nothing at all. You can make a difference by showing them new experiences.

Dissonance: Often one agent's pleasure depends on the pain of another. For you to enjoy a sumptuous steak, another animal has to have its throat cut. Victory is a wonderful pleasure, but that necessarily requires a loser. One of life's greatest delights is the well-timed insult, but of course that's going to hurt someone's feelings.

Skill Use: You are trained in five arts of pleasure, which can include massage, cooking, dancing, wine tasting, role-playing games, sex techniques, and so forth. If used deftly, these skill uses can give another player character an asset in interacting with an NPC.

Dynamo: Effete. As a true believer in hedonism, your body is especially reactive to pleasure. If you spend an expensive amount of currency and spend at least two hours engaging in pleasurable activity, you can take an extra recovery roll. This extra recovery roll normally takes place after the third roll (which takes one hour) and before the fourth (which requires ten hours of rest). As an extra benefit, and if the GM allows it, you can spend an exorbitant amount of currency in one evening's revelry and gain an extra XP for that adventure. Two hours to initiate.

Malison: Hyperesthesia. Your body is now extremely sensitive to bright lights and loud sudden sounds. You are now very susceptible to flash bombs and concussion grenades. You have an inability to resist any attack that targets your senses.

MAXIM SODALITY

"The great principle of morality, 'To do as one would be done to,' is more commended than practiced."

-- John Locke

"History is not the soil of happiness. The periods of happiness are blank pages in it."

-- Georg Hegel

You are the defender of the status quo. Other agents may scream about cultural progress and draft silly five-year plans, but you know better. Anyone who wants to build a Utopia only wants to enslave you and yours. The most important goal of civilization is to resist revolutionary change. A culture in a constant state of flux is really no culture at all. Society works best when every agent knows his place and stays there. Safety and Order, at bottom, are really the same concepts.

To be even more blunt, humans are brutish and nasty and therefore must be kept civilized by a strict set of laws. You cannot appeal to man's better nature, nor even to abstract reason, but only to real-world traditions. In law, you have precedents. In politics, you have institutions. Note that most social interventions, those attempts to eradicate poverty or crime, create more problems than they solve. Besides, where are those renovators when the barbarians are pounding on the gates?

To preserve civilization, you cannot worry about feathery concepts such as equality, honesty, friendship, decency, honor, etiquette, innocence, mercy or inalienable rights. The State only cares about loyalty and competence. If you are not both, you are meat. Man is the only animal capable of making promises and the most important promise is to OBEY.

On a personal level, this means you will obey the law to the best of your ability at all times. If two laws seem to contradict one another, that doesn't mean you're off the leash. You just need to call your lawyer. You might also have annoying anal retentive tendencies, such as taking pictures or drawing diagrams of the "crime scene" after every combat. Don't forget the paperwork.

Dissonance: A society that totally resists innovation can become so static that it is vulnerable to corruption and decadence, which are also forms of ironic, rotten change. Every

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once in a while, civilization must accept some incremental changes to heal corruption, but these are termed “policy shifts” or (better yet) “restorations.”

Skill Use: You are trained in any use of counter-espionage, political strategy, and interrogation (enhanced or not). The GM may allow you to parse out the motives of multiple political agents if you spend at least 4 hours gathering intelligence about them. This skill use will have a difficulty of 4 or more.

Dynamo: *Hidebound Hide (The Good)*. Your flesh has become so ingrained with Law that it resists any attempts to change it. You are trained in any defense against a power that transforms your flesh against your will. If you fail your defense roll and you are not dead or stunned, you can spend 2 Might points per level of the power used against you on the following round. Doing so negates the unwanted power. Enabler.

Malison: *Hidebound Hide (The Bad)*. Your flesh has become so ingrained with Law that it resists all influences even if you desire it. If you use a cypher or power that changes your physical makeup to any degree (such as hardening your bones to provide Armor or changing your skin as camouflage), you must make a difficulty 2 Might challenge or the power has no effect on you. No amount of training or assets can help you with this roll, but Effort works normally.

MYTHOPOETIC LICENSE

“My mind loves to wander and doesn’t allow itself to be restricted to the confines of truth.”

-- Rene Descartes

“From matters of fact nothing ever follows but matters of fact.”

-- Edmund Husserl

Here’s the score: A person’s psychic self has layers. The uppermost layer is the everyday persona, the everyday ego that gives us purpose and identity. It’s the face we wear for society. Below the persona lies the unconscious mind, which is built of animal qualities and primitive instincts. Sometimes, the unconscious mind can disrupt the normal workings of the conscious mind. There is a third layer. It is a collective unconscious super mind that is a vast ocean that

contains all the individual minds. We’ll call it the world soul.

The world soul is made of ancient images from the past, forgotten mythologies and latent mysteries, sleeping gods and multi-symbolic icons. The signs of the zodiac and the plaques of the Tarot are literal forces in the World Soul. Every myth and legend ever told seeps down into the world soul, becoming archetypes such as the Wise Old Man, the Dragon, the Trickster, the Virginal Huntress, and so many forth. Even our personal dreams and fantasies get played out in the world soul.

The process works both ways. Our personal unconscious minds dip into the world soul, pull forth the primordial archetypes, and use them as guides for apprehending reality. This is why cultures all over the globe share the same archetypes. Ideas are like animals in the wilderness. They roam from mind to mind across the world soul.

On a personal level, you know that the world soul can be a source of strength and a source of anxiety. Diving into the kaleidoscopic whirlwind that is the world soul can be a terrifying experience, but that experience can give you the wisdom to deal with despair, passion, and frustrated desire. Some say that you could attain immortality by creating your own archetype that lives on in the dreams of mortals.

Dissonance: This one reads more like a fad faith than a nuts and bolts philosophy.

Skill Use: You are trained in any interaction task when you have time to engage in a serious, involved conversation that lasts one hour. “Tell me about your latest dream. What do you think it means?”

Dynamo: *Dream Cypher*. You initiate this ability when you go to bed. That night, you dip into the world soul to find an answer to your current problem. You spend 2 XP for a psychic cypher that exists in your head until it is used. This cypher counts against your normal limit. The GM chooses the exact cypher but it should at least help your current situation if not solve the problem outright. Sometimes, the GM may announce that you can gain a dream artifact but that it will require a series of tricky encounters in the world soul and 3 XP (at least) in order to get it. Eight hours to initiate.

Malison: *Phantom Enemies*. Sometimes the world soul bleeds into your waking life at the

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most inopportune times. The GM can invoke this malison as an Intrusion in any combat but no more than three times per session. When an episode hits, you suffer from paranoid hallucinations of enemies lurking around corners or in the shadows. You will waste a number of rounds shooting or stabbing at an enemy that is not really there. The first time this happens in a session, it lasts for three rounds. The second time, it lasts two rounds. The third time, just one round. If the GM is feeling particularly cruel, this malison could also affect you in role-playing situations. Maybe during a tense negotiation, you just can't shake the feeling that there are assassins behind the curtains or snipers outside the windows.

NEO-PANGLOSSIA

“Do not think that one has to be sad in order to be militant, even though the thing one is fighting is abominable.”

— Michel Foucault

“Where the willingness is great, the difficulties cannot be great.”

— Niccolò Machiavelli

Listen, this is not really the best of all possible worlds. But then, the idea that things cannot get any better is really a pessimistic one. The point is that things can get better. The trick is to pick attainable goals and then fight like mad for them rather than waiting around for a silly “historical process” to save us.

A world entirely without evil is not possible so it is hopeless to wish for one. Would it be possible for us to recognize good if evil did not exist? But then again, it is naïve and immature to give in to the evil, to claim that since the world is evil, why not me, too? Sin is the product of lazy cynicism. This universe might be a malign place but it is better than many alternatives, so count your blessings.

The real citizens fight against evil on all sides with a happy fortitude. We might not be perfect but we have sufficient reason to make ourselves better. Besides, the challenge of evil brings out the best in us. In the face of evil, we become charitable, courageous, honorable, and dependable.

On a personal level, you are driven to attain self-knowledge rather than outward shows of worth such as money or fame. Also, you have

the ability, much to the annoyance of your enemies, to accept and learn from your failures.

Dissonance: The amount of suffering in the world cannot be rationalized by this or any philosophy. Evil beggars belief, stuns our sensibilities, and often just makes us more evil.

Skill Use: You are trained in all attempts to resist intimidation and the effects of despair.

Dynamo: *Can-Do Attitude.* Whenever you retry a failed task (see page 195 of *The Tome*), you do not have to apply the first level of Effort in order to attempt the retry. If the GM has decided that multiple levels of Effort are needed to make the retry, then you must apply the extra levels beyond the first or, more simply put, subtract one from the total levels of Effort needed to make the retry. Enabler.

Malison: *Pronoia.* This malison is the opposite of paranoia. You have an unreasonable belief that everyone wishes you well. This counts as an inability for tasks that allow you to see through deception and disguises.

PACIFISM

“We used to wonder where war lived, what it was that made it so vile. And now we realize that we know where it lives... inside ourselves.”

— Albert Camus

“If an injury has to be done to a man it should be so severe that his vengeance need not be feared.”

— Niccolò Machiavelli

You abhor the use of violence as a means of conflict resolution. When threatened by bandits, which are ubiquitous in every RPG genre, your first instinct is to warn them off. When begins the barroom brawl – again, ubiquitous – your first thought is to protect any innocent bystanders. You almost always fight to subdue your opponent rather than kill.

But your pacifism does not have to mean that you are a milk-hearted theorist fresh from some ivory tower. You could be a worldly-wise warrior who knows that to create the peace, you sometimes have to kill the right people. The point is to use only just enough violence to end injustice. You despise the use of bloodshed even

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though you might be really, really good at dishing it out.

But peace is not simply an absence of violence. It is a communal feeling of trust, loyalty, and justice. Children must be fed, the elderly must be cared for. Just because you are a pacifist doesn't mean you will sit idly by while fellow citizens suffer oppression. What you will never do, however, is resort to assassination or terrorism. Remember that victory does not retroactively justify the use of violence.

On a personal level, you don't have to be a mousy milquetoast. You have opinions and you don't have to be shy about sharing them. You can even get angry in an argument. But you will never resort to hateful or violent talk. "Those people should be taken out and shot!" is something you will never say. You will feel regret after every combat, even feeling compelled to write letters of consolation to your fallen foe's loved ones.

Dissonance: Ironically, being the Peace Bringer means that you have to impose your will on other people. Extolling the virtues of pacifism often means creating a lot of conflict through demonstrations, rallies, petitions, and civil disobedience. And isn't it an oxymoron to say that you fight for peace?

Skill Use: You are trained in interactions in which you resolve an argument, prevent a fight, call for a truce, or otherwise calm down a heated situation. You're the one to stand in front of the angry lynch mob and get them to disperse.

Dynamo: *Personal Subdual Field (4+ Intellect points)*. You have undergone a spiritual transformation into a living agent of nonviolence. When you activate this dynamo, any NPC combatants of level 2 or lower cannot attack you for one minute. This effect ends prematurely if you use an attack action, including the use of weaponized cyphers or abilities. The targets are powerless to attack you even if you perform actions which they would otherwise expressly forbid. For instance, the targeted guards of a slave chain gang could not attack you even if you were freeing their prisoners. But the guards could perform any other action they wanted, such as attacking the prisoners directly. Instead of applying Effort to decrease the difficulty, you can apply Effort to increase the maximum level of the target. Thus, if you applied three levels of Effort to this dynamo, no target of level 5 or lower could attack you for one minute. Action to initiate.

Malison: *Combat Allergy*. Your body is now so dedicated to peace that it suffers a physical abreaction in combat. The first time you make an attack action in a given encounter (but not in any subsequent rounds after that), you must make a difficulty 3 Might challenge. If you fail, you must roll a d20. If you roll an even number, your skin breaks out in hives, your lungs constrict, your vision goes cloudy, your brain gets vertigo, or your hands suffer the "shakes." In game terms, this means that every action you take during the encounter has its difficulty moved one step to your detriment. If you roll an odd number, your body suffers from severe gastric cramps, instant migraine, or mild heart seizure. In game terms, this means you take 5 points of damage. To add more variety to the situation, the GM may say that a result of 20 means you have no extreme reaction, maybe just a nose bleed. But a result of 1 might mean something especially severe, like hysterical blindness or shellshock (totally stunned).

PANPSYCHISM

"I cannot complain that I have received from God an insufficiently ample and imperfect will, or free choice, because I have observed that it is limited by no boundaries."

-- Rene Descartes

"It is a matter of envisaging the self as a little God which inhabits me and which possesses my freedom as a metaphysical virtue."

-- Jean-Paul Sartre

Many scientists claim that consciousness is a property arising out of physical processes within the human brain. You know this is bunk. The Universe is itself constructed out of mental phenomena; material bodies are merely the substrates of immaterial information. The Mind is not a secondary quality of the Universe but the prime mover of it.

Granted, there are differences between purposeful (teleonomic) systems such as human beings and mere aggregates of information such as the weather, plants, the movement of energy, the formation of crystals, the movement of water and fire, and so forth. But without conscious minds, the Universe would never be aware of itself. Mentality is reality.

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So what does this mean? It means that our individual conscious minds form an experiential web of apperception across the Universe. OK, what does that mean? It means that our minds are not concrete individual nuggets. They are part of the greater whole, a panpsychic sphere of information that is as fundamental to the Universe as gravity. In a word, our minds blend together at the edges to form a gestaltic uber-mind. Some philosophers of a more spiritual bent refer to this gestalt as the Godhead.

On a personal level, believing yourself to be part of a Universal Consciousness, you don't have the concrete sense of self that others do. Often your use of language is troubling and confusing to others, as you refer to yourself in the third person and say things like, "We need to rethink ourselves."

Dissonance: If all people are part of the same system of universal thought, then how come they do not behave as insects in a swarm? Humans want to believe that are separate individuals and will behave in belligerently absurd ways in order to prove it.

Skill Use: You can read the room. You are trained in any task involved in getting an overall impression of an individual or group of people. You can get the answers to such questions as, "Are these tavern-goers prone to violence?" or "Is this politician susceptible to bribes?"

Dynamo: Reading Qualia (4 Intellect Points). Qualia are instances of individual subjective, conscious experience. While science may define "red" as a certain wavelength of light, that doesn't really describe the experience of enjoying a red rose or being horrified by the sight of blood. You can sense the qualia of all conscious beings within long range for ten minutes. In this manner, you can quickly track down any creature who is subject to a certain sensation such as feeling acute anxiety or having a bullet wound in its leg. Action to initiate.

Malison: Hypersensitive. You are sensitive to the feelings and emotions of people. Literally. You can feel the hunger, fatigue, angst, delirium, anger, fear, lust, and everything else of everyone around you as waves of free-form emotion. You cannot pick out specific emotions out of certain targets because you are never sure from which direction the emotions are coming from. You gain this distracted condition, meaning that the difficulty of all Intellect tasks are moved one step to your detriment, whenever

more than 100 people are within long range, such as at a crowded dance club.

PARAESTHETICS

"Our knowledge depends upon the right use of those powers nature hath bestowed upon us."

-- John Locke

"There is nothing fallow, nothing sterile, nothing dead in the universe, no chaos, no confusion save in appearance."

-- Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz

It is not enough to say that a young dancer is beautiful while an alien larva is ugly. The concepts of beauty and ugliness do not really tell you anything about an entity or object. What you want to know about a subject is its uniqueness, that special quality that sets it apart in the universe. What is that subject's purpose in life?

This philosophy makes most fine art irrelevant as it looks for meaning in messy everyday life. A notched-up sword has as much sublimity as a fine painting. An elderly woman working at a stove has as much human dignity as a ballet dancer. Even a rotting corpse is wonderful in its own way. The point is that an engagement with life means getting dirty and bloody. Roses are pretty to be sure but it is the worms that work the earth.

You could call this philosophy the science of prosaics. It opposes fetishizing memes and fashion. It rails against a life of monotonous leisure and pleasure. It rails against the glorification of warriors and sports heroes. It is kind of the mid-point between hedonism and ascetix, both of which paraesthetics dismisses as garish and self-involved.

On a personal level, you are objective to a fault. You will not fall for a pretty face, nor will you recoil from the victim of mutation. You don't care what the classic sports car looks like. You want to know if it will get you across the desert. That said, you're the kind of person who can put on an old faded denim jacket and make it look smashing.

Dissonance: One cannot pretend that all pleasures are equal. Even a paraesthetic will prefer a ribeye steak to a bowl of tripe. And while the paraesthetic might claim that physical

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beauty does not matter, he will admit that a physically fit body is inherently more useful than an unfit one.

Skill Use: You are trained to resist any effects that use ugliness to shock or beauty to transfix. You are also trained to resist any effects that would disgust a normal person, such as being covered by a swarm of spiders.

Dynamo: *Function, Not Form (3 Intellect Points)*. Because you are so used to dismissing the arbitrary appearances of individuals, you are supernaturally adept at assessing their abilities. You know their essence at a glance. If you take a round to size up an NPC, you can learn one of their modifications even if their appearance gives no clue. For instance, the GM might tell you an NPC has all tasks related to disguise and deceiving as one level greater than normal. And thus you could figure that the NPC, who looks like a normal secretary, is really an espionage agent. Action.

Malison: *Stendahl Syndrome*. This is one of those psychological disorders, along with synesthesia and Tourette's Syndrome, that is way more common in fiction than in real life. Still, it works for our purpose. The idea is that your character has denied the existence of beauty so much and for so long that he actually becomes ironically more susceptible to the effects of those works of art that have undeniable craftsmanship and significance. When in the presence of a great work of art, which will include all those hidden temples that occur regularly in most adventure campaigns, your character suffers rapid heartbeat, faintness of breath, and dizziness. The difficulties of all tasks you attempt will be moved one step to your detriment for the duration.

QUANTUM ANARCHY

"We cannot infer the events of the future from those of the present. Belief in the causal nexus is superstition."
-- Ludwig Wittgenstein

"Human reality can detach itself from the world – in questioning, in systematic doubt, in skeptical doubt."
-- Jean-Paul Sartre

Quantum anarchy is a rejection of all authority, including even that imposed by the laws of

physics. Every association – whether it is between individuals or between an individual and an organization or between an organization and the larger society – must be voluntary. Each person is under no obligation to obey her parents, teachers, mentors, or clergy. That same person is under no obligation to obey the dictates of social authority, no matter if the source of that authority comes from the state, the church, or the corporate bloc.

The quantum anarchist doesn't have to make Molotov cocktails in the kitchen sink. She believes that the gradual enlightenment of the greater population will make governments and markets unnecessary. And most terrorists are tools of other established powers anyway. It's better to be a savvy prankster, spray-painting the Nike swoosh logo on American-made fighter jets bound for Indonesia, for example.

But quantum anarchy goes deeper than just politics. The laws of nature are seen to be a limit to a person's self-development. Order and structure are insidious properties of the universe. Left unchecked, they stultify creativity and even life itself. Many quantum anarchists become adepts so that they can flout the laws gravity, magnetism, and time. The most belligerent of quantum anarchists will avoid even social media!

On a personal level, you will try to get along with life without worrying about vehicle registration, birth certificate, passports, or other documented forms of disgusting order. When choosing sides in any conflict, you will support the underdog until, of course, the underdog starts to win. Then you'll switch sides. You will be the smuggler, the hacker, the philosophical agitator. You'll be the one to make illegal moonshine in your basement for no good reason other than you're not supposed to.

Dissonance: Is this a philosophy or just a rationalization for your willy-nilly whims?

Skill Use: You are trained in any task that involves practical jokes, espionage, social betrayal, or any action that throws a monkey wrench into the clockwork of bureaucracy.

Dynamo: *Chaos Incursion*. By spending 2 XP, your character can (consciously or not) create a random happenstance much like a GM's Incursion. There is no guarantee that this event will help you but it's not guaranteed to hinder you either. It's random. As a player, you can suggest an idea for the Incursion but the GM will most likely tweak the final result to fit the

current adventure. You can invoke this dynamo when you feel like you've hit a wall in the adventure but beware that you could make things even worse for the party. Action.

Malison: *Crippled Decision Making.* The edicts of quantum anarchy have so seeped into your brain that you cannot make a decision to save your life – sometimes literally! When it comes time for you to make a decision without the help of other player characters, you must rely on a physical prop. This could be as simple as a coin toss or as complicated as the I-Ching, but it might be more fun to use a Crazy 8 Ball or even open random fortune cookies.

STATISTICAL PROCESS CONTROL

“We must remember that the future is neither wholly ours nor wholly not ours, so that neither must we count upon it as quite certain to come nor despair of it as quite certain not to come.”

-- Epicurus

“Mathematics is indeed of the highest certainty, though we only have a crude reflection of it.”

-- Ludwig Wittgenstein

The universe is not necessary, necessary meaning that it could not have happened in any other way than it did. But the universe is modal, modal meaning that its behavior remains the same from moment to moment. That means that, while no power in the universe can predict the future everywhere with a 100% success rate, it is possible to predict the behavior of a sub-system with a high degree of success over a short period of time. Got that?

So the name of the game is predictability, not destiny. Given a set of parameters, we can calculate the probability of an even from known, current circumstances. The keywords being *known* and *current*. Unforeseen circumstances will totally skew the numbers. One must have good information for the equations to give you the truth. As the old Bible saying goes, “Garbage In, Garbage Out.”

So is the world absolutely chaotic or genuinely deterministic? It does not matter to SPC. What matters is how the data is collected and collated, what model is used to communicate the data,

and with what level of precision one wants the answer. Much of SPC uses messy stochastic equations, what one could call “gooey math,” which are weird sloppy algorithms held together by human intuition.

And speaking of humans. They are the pesky variables in any SPC equation. A single human being cannot be contained by math. This is not a game mechanic cop-out; it holds true of real life as well. While the behavior of a crowd can be predicted, no amount of mathematical divination will tell you what an individual will do.

Dissonance: If SPC has such predictive power, why are political pollsters and market analysts so often wrong?

Skill Use: You are trained in mathematics. If you are already trained in mathematics, then choose another skill that relies heavily on mathematics, such as astronomy, computers, or machinery.

Dynamo: *Marginal Analysis (2+ Intellect Points).* Given at least ten minutes and some scrap paper, you can quantify the uncertainty of a course of action. In game terms, this means the GM tells you the difficulty of the next task that you or an ally plans to perform. For example, your group wants to sneak into an enemy compound without being noticed by the security guards. Like most guards in any game, these ones are level 2 but have perception as level 3. Level 3 means a target number of 9, which means a 60% chance of success. From there, you can factor in your ally's skill level and any assets available. For simplicity's sake, if you want the odds of besting a foe in combat, the creature's level determines your chance of success, even if it's multiple foes. You can use marginal analysis for multiple tasks, but for each task beyond the first, you must apply one additional level of Effort. For example, if you want to know the odds of sneaking into the compound, picking the lock on the front door, and then breaking into the computer system, you need to spend the initial 2 Intellect points plus two levels of Effort. For marginal analysis to work, you must have some knowledge of the task ahead. If you are up against an unknown foe whose abilities are a complete mystery, the GM may rule that performing marginal analysis on that foe is impossible. Ten minutes to initiate.

Malison: *Numbers Fugue.* Whenever you fail a mathematics task, your mind refuses to admit failure and enters a trance-like state in

order to work out the problem. The fugue state lasts for one hour and you can perform no actions in this time. The good news is that you can retry the mathematics task without spending Effort. Other characters can bring you out of the fugue state early by inducing some shock, possibly slapping your face or dumping a bucket of water over you. Even then, however, you are "out of it" and all the tasks you attempt have their difficulty moved one step to your detriment for ten minutes.

STORM AND STRESS HEROICA

**"But as mighty a figure [the hero] must trample down many an innocent flower, crush to pieces many things in its path."
-- Georg Hegel**

**"Never was anything great achieved without danger."
-- Niccolo Machiavelli**

Civilization was not built by the meek or the peace-makers. Civilization was built by strong heroes. History would rumble down the years like a herd of dumb animals were it not for heroic leaders that take control and tell the stupid, incompetent masses what to do. To take the reins of history, the leader must show immense strength and bravery as well as competence and cunning. The greatest of the heroic leaders can become a legendary Over-Man (trademark pending).

The Over-Man is at the very tippy-top of the pyramid. He doesn't have to worry about such slave moralities as self-denial or self-sacrifice. But the Over-Man is not in it for the sex, drugs, and rock & roll, for that is decadent behavior and decadence is weakness. What the Over-Man wants is a challenge. He wants self-fulfillment through discovery, conquest, and creativity.

Mostly, however, the Over-Man wants to rule. This type of hero doesn't necessarily have to be a warlord; he could also be a prophet, artist, politician, or late-night TV guru. But he is most definitely a leader who expects his commandments to be obeyed. He doesn't have to threaten people to get what he wants. Most often, they voluntarily obey his magnetic personality.

On a personal level, you must dare to become what you are. Since heroes are born in conflict, you must never shy away from conflict. Life's meaning can only be found by grabbing it by the tender parts with both hands, not by nosing about in old books.

Dissonance: Every person, no matter what their station in life, thinks that they are a hero, even if their personal archetype is the Misunderstood Genius or Born Under A Bad Sign. And does the world really need another Napoleon Bonaparte?

Skill Use: You are trained in "heroic acts." The GM will be the final arbiter of what qualifies as an heroic act, but it should be something above and beyond what the story calls for. Jumping across a ravine to get away from the bad guys is exciting, but not heroic. Jumping across a ravine to land in the middle of the bad guys is suitably heroic. Standing up to a king in his own throne room could also qualify. Please be aware that succeeding at a heroic task will often have bad consequences of its own.

Dynamo: Heroic Will. Whenever you invoke your "heroic act" skill use, you can spend Intellect points for Effort even if it's a physical task. Enabler.

Malison: Hubris. Fate has a way of slapping you down when you get too cocky. If you invoke your "heroic act" skill use more than once in a single game day, the GM can hit you with an Intrusion without rewarding you any XP.

THE MANIFESTO

**"There is nothing originally more desirable about money than about any heap of glittering pebbles."
-- John Stuart Mill**

**"Physical force must be overthrown with physical force, and theory will be a physical force as soon as the masses understand it."
-- Karl Marx**

Yes, that Manifesto.

Accept a warning: Should you subscribe to this philosophy, you will be reviled, even blacklisted, as a most despicable villain, a scoundrel who dares to shake a fist at the most beneficent moneyed powers. You will belong to a secret organization with a goofy name like

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"League of the Just." You will work long nights scribbling diatribes for suppressed newspapers. You will wander from city to city, getting expelled from one university after another. People of faith will spit on your shoes. Cops will punch you in the teeth.

It is not a sexy philosophy.

Dissonance: You may decry the use of money, but you need tons of it to help the cause.

Skill Use: You are skilled at public speaking and writing papers with titles like, "The Critique of Political Oeconomy."

Dynamo: Connections. The movement of The Manifesto is not powerful but pervasive. Its agents are everywhere, nestled in every new city or neighborhood you visit. If you spend at least four hours scouring a new location, you will meet a connection within the movement. You can reduce this time to one hour if you spread around three or four bribes equal to inexpensive items. The connection will not be a full-fledged ally and may not be able to help you on your current adventure, but he will offer some food and lodging, even hide you from interested authorities if necessary, and can supply general information. You can think of this as a medium-term benefit that you do not have to pay XP for. Several hours to initiate.

Malison: Alienation. It's not just the capitalists that hate you. Members of law enforcement, orthodox intellectuals, and even the working people will view you with suspicion and disdain. Often, you bring it on yourself by saying the phrase "class warfare" one too many times at a party. You have an inability in all pleasant social interactions.

TRANSCENDENTAL SOLIPSISM

"In the act of reflecting I pass judgment on the consciousness reflected on; I am ashamed of it, I am proud of it, I will it, I deny it."

-- Jean-Paul Sartre

"The understanding, like the eye, whilst it makes us see and perceive all other things, takes no notice of itself."

-- John Locke

We are told that absolute space and time do not really exist, that they are relative according to the observer. Some thinkers go further and claim that they do not exist at all without an observer. You know, Schrodinger's Cat and all that. But you go the furthest and claim that none of it exists without you. The whole damnable universe exists only in your head.

Let's back up a bit. Life is a much richer experience than just the excitation of nerve endings, more than just input into our eyes and ears. Say you jump off a cliff into a deep pool. Your equilibrium enjoys the freefall and sudden stop. Your skin is shocked by the all-over cold. Your eyes can see the sun as a shimmery dot through the water. It is quite the experience but that experience does not happen without the mind. The only thing you really experience is your own mind. You are making the universe happen and not the other way around.

Wait, let's try again. You could try to reduce your consciousness to a jumble of electro-chemical firings within your brain, but what does this say? It tells us nothing about the awareness of the passage of time, the power of emotional desire, the second life of dreams and imagination, the trickiness of memory, the subtlety of language, or the enjoyment of our many daily social interactions. The salient feature of consciousness is "intentionality," which is just a fancy word for will and it is your will that imposes order and meaning upon the universe. Your thoughts force it to behave.

Some call you voluntarily insane, others a hopeless crank, and a few might even call you a visionary guru. But you are the one who decides which one of them is right.

Dissonance: The existence of other minds makes it difficult to be a complete solipsist. Other people, especially other player characters, behave in maddeningly idiosyncratic ways, in ways that you could have never dreamt on your own.

Skill Use: You don't like it when other people screw with reality. That's your job. If an NPC uses a power to physically transform the environment, and you have a power that could conceivably counter the first power, you are considered trained in that use of the power. For example, if an enemy wizard freezes a river in order for his minions to cross it, and you use a power to unfreeze the river, you are trained in that one use of the power.

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Dynamo: *Special Effects.* This dynamo and its accompanying malison are most appropriate for a character with the adept type. You have complete control over the special effects of all your powers, including those gained from cyphers and artifacts. A special effect is any side effect of your power that adds no game benefit to the situation but is added on for the coolness factor. For example, you can decide that one use of your onslaught power is in the shape of a turquoise dragon but the next time it's a black screaming skull. Again, the special effect adds no damage and cannot act as an asset. It might seem trite and useless, but remember that your control of special effects is total and constant. When you use a cypher, you decide how it looks and sounds. The GM has no say in the matter. Enabler.

Malison: *Magician's Tourette's Syndrome.* You suffer from a disorder that causes weird twitches in your face and hands. You also make random vocalizations ("Abraca-pocus!"). Often, these involuntary vocal and somatic spasms cause you to uncontrollably cast spells at inopportune times. The GM invokes this malison whenever she wishes as an Intrusion ("Hocus-cadabra!"), but usually no more than once per session. She then chooses any ability, spell, cypher, or artifact you possess and determines that the power goes off without your consciously willing it. You do have to spend any Intellect point costs for invoking the power. Edge will reduce the cost as normal but you cannot apply Effort. If the power requires a target, it should be chosen randomly. Every once in a while, your spasm-casting might accidentally help you in a dangerous situation, but don't count on it.

ULTIMA RULE

**"Truth scarce ever yet carried it by vote anywhere at its first appearance."
-- John Locke**

**"Human life confronts itself from one side of the globe to the other and speaks to itself in its entirety through books and culture."
-- Maurice Merleau-Ponty**

Most properties in the universe cannot be expressed without a physical manifestation. Pain does not exist without a body to feel it. In order to show beauty, you must show a beautiful object – a rose, a painting, a lithe dancer, what have you. But this is not the case with truth.

Truth is more than just a quality of a statement. Truth is not merely the opposite of false. Truth is a physical force in the universe along with electromagnetism and gravity.

We must also discern between facts and the truth. Facts are gleaming little things that are obvious to all. But real truths are curious, shadowy, elusive things. They must be hunted down and then pinned to a wall. Finding the truth is bringing your mind in harmony with the universe.

Exemplars of this philosophy believe that to know the truth is to know everything there is to know. Is this possible? Perhaps not, but that does not stop the proponents of ultima rule from trying. They have spent decades, even centuries, compiling a MegaText that contains all human knowledge. In some worlds, this might be a labyrinthine library out of a Jorge Luis Borges story, while in other worlds it might be a planet-sized encyclopedia.

On a personal level, if you cannot speak the truth, be silent.

Dissonance: It is impossible to prevent imagination from filling in the gaps of our knowledge. And conspiracy theories are inherently more interesting than the truth.

Skill Uses: You are skilled in research.

Dynamo/Malison: *Deaf to Deception.* This weird philosophical power is both the dynamo and malison of ultima rule. Your ears cannot hear a lie. Physically cannot hear it. So when someone suddenly goes silent even though their lips are moving, you know that they are willfully trying to deceive you. The problem is, you don't know exactly what they're saying because you can't hear it. After a time, you might get pretty good at reading lips, but this is always at least a difficulty 3 Intellect task. Are you also blind to deception? Will written lies be invisible to you? GM's call. Enabler.

WEIRD REALISM

**"There may be other and different intelligent beings, of show faculties [a man] has little knowledge or apprehension as a worm shut up in one drawer of a cabinet hath of the senses or understanding of a man."
-- John Locke**

“No reality can be immediately translated into representations of any sort. Reality itself is weird because reality itself is incommensurable with any attempt to represent or measure it.”

-- Graham Harman

No body of thought – not religion, not science, not nothing – can hope to describe reality because reality exists outside of thought and thought can touch reality only in tenuous, abstract ways. There is a phenomenological gap between our minds and what is really real. We do not experience reality firsthand. We experience it through an imperfect sensory system and then try to categorize it with cut-and-dried terminology.

But reality is not content. It cannot be reduced to a mere list of its qualities. Take a gold coin. It has a particular metallic yellow hue. It is hard yet malleable. Viewed one way, it is a sphere. Viewed another, it is a thin slice of metal. It is inscribed with a bas-relief of political significance. You could extend this list ad infinitum and you would still not exhaust the reality of the gold coin, how it feels in your hand, how it sounds piled up with other coins, what kind of social value it has, and so on.

And that’s just a measly gold coin. Try to explain to a civilian what combat with a dragon is like. You cannot know it unless you live it. Now extend this view to the universe. We do not experience the universe, not really. What would the universe look like if we could see dark matter? What would it sound like if we could hear the background radiation? We will never totally solve the mystery of reality.

But on a personal level, you can try. Unlike over-intellectualized modern thinkers, you refuse to become hypnotized by the surface quality of things. You dig deeper, try to see the deeper patterns of everyday life. Do not lose sight of the irrational roots of life. Reawaken yourself to the fresh perspectives of children, primitive peoples, madmen, and even animals. Constantly remind yourself of the give and take between you and the space you live in. Every object displays the human face it acquires in a human gaze, and when you grab a fistful of honey, the fistful of honey also grabs you back.

Dissonance: What?!

Skill Use: You are trained in any perception tasks that rely on esoteric or subconscious senses. For example, you are trained in detecting subliminal messages or noticing the effects of subsonics on other living things.

Dynamo: *Making Strange (5+ Intellect points)*. You can cause a sapient creature within short range to suffer a noumenal crisis. The creature must be able to see and hear you. The target must be level 2 or lower. If successful, for the next ten minutes, the creature no longer understands one aspect of society and culture that the rest of us take for granted. Some examples of noumenal crises:

- Target loses the ability to understand metaphor
- Target does not understand the rules of grammar, making complete sentences all but impossible
- Target does not understand the concept of math and numerals
- Target does not recognize the use of one particular type of tool (hammer, cellphone, magical potion, cybernetic implant, etc.)
- Target does not understand iconography or the concept of maps
- Target does not recognize facial cues or body language
- Target cannot tell the difference between two categories, such as the colors red and green
- Target suffers from “face blindness,” and cannot tell one person from another without other clues, such as clothing

You are encouraged to come up with more examples but, as always, they are subject to GM approval. Instead of applying Effort to decrease the difficulty, you can apply Effort to increase the maximum level of the target. Thus, to use this dynamo on a level 5 target (three levels above the normal limit), you must apply three levels of Effort. Action to initiate.

Malison: *Noumenal Seizure*. As an Intrusion, the GM can complicate your life at least once per session by hitting you with a dose of your own medicine. You suffer one of the above noumenal crises for ten minutes.

YINYANGISM

“A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity.”

-- Soren Kierkegaard

“Nothingness lies coiled in the heart of being – like a worm.”

-- Jean-Paul Sartre

The universe itself is held together by the competition of two great forces – gravity and the inflation of space brought about by the Big Bang. They work against each other but are also complimentary. Without both, the universe would not exist. The same can be said of destruction and creation. When a star self-immolates as a super-nova, it spreads heavier elements across the galaxy, elements that make up planets and the life systems upon those planets. Even life and death are part of an ontological whole. It is meaningless to talk of one without the other.

Every aspect of life is made up of two polar forces – light versus dark, heat versus cold, negative versus positive, mystery versus knowledge, passive versus active, feminine versus masculine, mind versus matter, subjective versus objective, and (of course) good versus evil. These opposing forces mix together to form a dynamic system. Without the contrasts, reality would be a dull grey slate.

Or maybe reality would not exist at all. The existence of something implies the opposite, nothingness. Because existence does in fact exist, we can imagine nothing, even if by definition, nothing does not exist. Our existence is a top-heavy boulder balanced upon the point of a paradox.

On a personal level, you are comfortable with diametric opposites within the same system, even yourself. Many proponents of yinyangism claim that a single person is not yet a whole human being. Only when we find a life partner who compliments our strengths and weaknesses can we be considered whole.

Dissonance: Talk of dualism is simply idle chatter about categories. For example, motion and stillness are concepts relative to the observer so it's silly to talk about them as opposing natural forces.

Skill Use: You are trained in any aspect of history or society that is a clear-cut example of dualism. A good example would be the battles between surface elves and shadow elves. Another example would be the conflict between the hedonist and ascetic movements.

Dynamo: Dual Nature. Once you attain the status of true believer in yinyangism, choose another descriptor for your character that would be the opposite of your current descriptor. Clumsy would be the opposite of Graceful, for instance, and Guarded would be the opposite of Jovial. (You can stretch the concept of “opposite” if you want, such as saying Stealthy is the opposite of Virtuous.) At the beginning of each game day, choose which descriptor you want to be for that day. Eight hours to initiate.

Malison: Harmonic Imbalance. At the start of every adventure session, the GM will apply a dichotomy (see below for a list of usable dichotomies) to your character. You will then choose one side of the dichotomy to which you will suffer a weakness. For example, the GM applies the “Heat/Cold” environmental dichotomy to your character and you choose to be susceptible to the “Cold” side. So, for that adventure, all of your tasks have their difficulties moved by one step to your detriment when in cold situations. (And you better believe the GM will have the villain duck into a meat locker that adventure.) The social dichotomies apply their negative effect to all social interactions with the designated type of NPC. The GM is encouraged to come up with his own dichotomies.

Environmental Dichotomies:

Heat/Cold
Light/Darkness
Day/Night
Urban/Rural
Land/Sea

Social Dichotomies:

Male/Female
Young/Old
Own Race/Other Races
Rich/Poor
Authority/Dissidents
Civilized/Barbaric

ZEITGEISTRY

“Language is not complete in any speaker; it exists perfectly only within a collectivity.”
-- Ferdinand de Saussure

“World history in general is the development of Spirit in Time, just as nature is the development of Idea in Space.”
-- Georg Hegel

This philosophy is the enemy of monolithic cultures and government-mandated lifestyles. Conformity is a crime against humanity. Society must be a true mixture of cultures. Each neighborhood must be allowed to keep its own identity, to eat and dress and love as it wills. That said, the neighborhood must not belly ache when its culture becomes co-opted by the larger community. Cultures cannot be kept separate but equal, and cultural piracy is not a thing.

Politics should be an open marketplace of ideas, a contest between many competing factions. It's a messy process but it's better than the alternative. People suffer when one system of thought dominates. The only sin is absolute certainty. We must have the courage of our lack of convictions.

In a cosmic sense, each religion has a claim to be a legitimate (but not sole) path to the Godhead.

On a personal level, you can only know yourself by understanding others. It can sometimes be a delicate balancing act between concern and indifference. Who are you to tell someone they cannot give their life savings to a cult? But you can certainly chastise the cult leader for telling others how to live.

Dissonance: Stir up the melting pot too much and all you get is a bland mush. Without cultural differences, what have you got? Just market demographics.

Skill Use: You are skilled at smoothing over a faux pas. If you or an ally commit a social mistake, and you attempt to deceive or persuade your way out of it, then you are considered skilled in that attempt.

Dynamo: Spirit of the Times. (4 Intellect Points) You are freakishly adept at adapting to new cultures, even if that new “culture” is just another band of adventurers you meet in the

wilderness. After interacting with a group of people for at least one minute, you can learn the motive common to that group. You learn the motive even if the interaction has been nothing but idle chit-chat. The difficulty of this task is equal to the average level of NPCs in the group. You may attempt this dynamo only once upon a given group. The ability cannot be used on a single NPC, only upon groups of three or more. So if you come across a caravan in the wilderness and you use this dynamo to learn that their shared motive is “taking what they want,” you understand that these “merchants” are really bandits. Most often, however, this ability will be used to proactively assimilate yourself into a new group. One minute to initiate.

Malison: Teratophilia. You go too far in your cultural sympathies. You become sexually aroused whenever you are within immediate range of a hideous monster. This includes any non-humanoid creature or any humanoid creature without a human-like face. When this happens, all tasks for you are moved one step to your detriment until you move out of range.

PHILOSOPHICAL INTERLUDES

“Every question presupposes a being who questions and a being who is questioned.”
-- Jean-Paul Sartre

“I am a thing that thinks, that is to say, a thing that doubts, affirms, denies, knows a few things, is ignorant of many things, wills, rejects, and also imagines and senses.”
-- Rene Descartes

“We presuppose nothing, not even philosophy.”
-- Edmund Husserl

“My thinking, like everyone's, has sticking to it the shriveled remains of my earlier (withered) ideas.”
-- Ludwig Wittgenstein

In even the most frenetic action movies, there are those quiet moments when the characters are just talking. Granted, these dialogues might not be deep affairs but they serve to put a breather between the chase sequence and the chop socky fight scene. Better believe your adventures need quiet moments, too.

Philosophy in the Cypher System

So what are you going to talk about? Most of the time, the PCs will be grilling the NPCs for information about the approaching dungeon and the big boss that dwells within it. Every once in a while, however, the GM or even the players can start a philosophical conversation whilst the characters float down the river on a raft or sit around a campfire at night. A great running gag would have one of the PC's lackeys or henchmen be a talented amateur philosopher, pestering the players with odd questions at odd times.

The following are some discussion seeds. Choose a topic that fits the current adventure and read aloud a couple of the sample expositions. Allow for cross-examination. Good players will run with the discussion. Excellent players will run with the discussion while remaining in character.

Justice

- Do people scream against injustice because they have a moral compulsion against injustice or because they're afraid of becoming victims of injustice?
- Can a society be completely unjust? Even pirates have their code of honor. If the pirate society didn't have at least a crude form of justice, it would fall apart.
- Were you born with a sense of justice or was it beat into your skull as a child? What does that say about justice that you have to beat it into someone's skull?
- How many of our so-called revolutions of the past were really just slight alterations of the old order?
- Does justice (or for that matter any civilized institution) make itself up as it goes along through history or does it spring full born from an ideal outside of our world?
- They say that the greatest liberty of the subjects depends upon the silence of the law. But what if "they" are evil men telling you to shut up?

Love

- Is love nothing more than the attempt to totally control another thinking being?
- There's a certain level of paranoia to every love affair. "Does she feel the same way I do? Does she not love me at all? Worse, does she love me even more?"
- What the hell is passion anyway? Simply the opposite of reason?
- To express our beliefs, we must use words. To express our desire, we must

use our eyes, our hands, our mouths. Is that better or worse?

- The concrete reality of love is made of a game of mirrors. Can you come up with other metaphors to describe love?
- People think love is spontaneous but it really has a set of rules. Even a kiss is highly ritualized. What happens when you try to break the rules?
- Some cynics say that love does not really exist because it cannot be properly defined. But then the light from a flashlight is no less real because it has no sharp boundaries.

Fate and Freedom

- Are we determined by God, by environment, by heredity, by psychology, by society? If that is so, and you lash out in a mindless way, where did that act come from?
- The dog cannot be anything but a dog. But we can choose to be anything we want, even an animal. We can even choose to be an inanimate object, but it will be the last choice we ever make. Is that all fate is, what we make of ourselves from moment to moment?
- Is there any such thing as fulfillment? Does our consciousness add anything to the universe?
- Are we allowed to make judgments about the universe for its behavior?
- Can any of us ever say that we are completely free? The freedoms we enjoy today were given to us by our forefathers. Can we say that we have freedom if we had no choice in the culture in which we were born?
- Is it really freedom if you behave in a way no one else does? Or are you obeying a mindless impulse? Shouldn't freedom require a reasonable choice behind it?
- Liberty is never absolute. We do not even have total liberty over our own bodies. You cannot stop your own heartbeat simply by willing it.
- For all people to be free, it must seem like a good idea to all people.
- Civilization frees us from the tyranny of nature but chains us with a dependence upon bureaucracy. Which is worse? And now that you've got the trite joke out of your system, seriously, which one is worse?
- Recognizing your own freedom is actually rather frightening. When we get into trouble, our first instinct is to blame

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another cause (another person, medication, society). We do not want to accept our own power to choose our own motives.

- Can you admit to yourself that success is not necessary for freedom?

Being

- You can imagine the smell of a rose without seeing the rose, but can you imagine a rose without imaging any one of its qualities? Does that mean there is no such thing as an abstract idea?
- If God were an innate idea, then we would not have to teach children about God. So why isn't He an innate idea?
- A person cannot help but have the idea of red in mind if his vision is filled with red. What else about our environment forces us to think in certain ways?
- Sometimes knowledge can only be known from context. For instance, try to define the word "form" without using it in a sample sentence.
- Our primary goal is to find order in the universe but what if order is merely a figment of our imagination?
- The workings of the universe are not mysterious. That it exists in the first place is.
- So the world exists. We don't doubt that. But we can envision a scenario in which the world does not exist. Where does that ability come from?
- Is the universe a variety of infinite objects and events or is it an eternal whole? If it's one or the other, how could we prove it?
- Because there are limits to our senses, we cannot know everything about an object. We can only list the qualities of the object that we can immediately apprehend. This leads to a creepy thought: We can only absolutely know an object (including another person) by its absence.
- Every object has a natural (physical) form and a value (psychological) form.
- Death does not really exist. It cannot be measured or photographed. Yet we cannot deny its presence. But then again, it does not have a *presence*. What gives?
- How is it possible to measure time? The past cannot be measured because it is gone by. The future cannot be measured because it has not yet come. The present cannot be measured because it has no extension. What gives?

Knowledge

- There is a difference between a false statement and a nonsensical one. "Dogs are reptiles" is a false statement. "Dogs smell like yellow" is nonsense. Often, an evil guru will speak nonsense because he knows you cannot say that it is false.
- Is there any such thing as Common Sense? If so, then why do people disagree about what it entails? Is it just a phrase people use to win arguments?
- A man cannot think and not know that he is thinking. But what about a sleeping dreamer? He is sort of thinking and is not completely cognizant of it.
- To know have knowledge of something, you must know who you are talking to. For example, the word "Vietnam" can refer to a southeast Asian country or to a grim period of American history.
- Objects in nature do not conform to our understanding. This is the most basic and one of the most painful facts of life.
- What aspects of our reason are completely transcendent, meaning that they cannot be confirmed or denied by experience? We're talking about the really abstract stuff like the concepts of Unity, Cause and Effect, Necessity, Totality, et effing cetera.
- No one has ever drawn a perfect triangle but everyone can imagine one. How is that possible?
- If we have an incomplete understanding of our own bodies, how can we claim to understand the universe?
- A philosopher hundreds of years ago writes a treatise. We read it today and are struck by its profundity. But then, how are we sure that what we read is what the philosopher intended?
- Have you noticed that every body of knowledge – mathematics, anthropology, whatever – gets to define itself, gets to delineate its own borders? What gives it this authority? Just itself alone? Is that fair?
- Most people believe that there is a harmony between human reason and the essence of things. Is that a mistake?
- It is said that aesthetic beauty transforms a person from a willing subject into a knowing subject, from a bundle of desires into a being of pure intellect. Do you buy any of that?
- Last week you knew all the words of a song by heart. Today, you don't

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remember any of the words. So when exactly did you stop knowing it?

- Someone asks you what you believe and you tell them. But then they ask, "How can you be sure that's what you really believe?" Does that question make any sense? And how would you answer it?
- What is the similarity between looking for a word in your memory and looking for a friend in the park? Is it the same sort of effort? Isn't it the same sort of relief when you succeed?

Society

- You cannot be an asshole by yourself. To be an asshole, you need a crowd around you that gets annoyed by you. Even the asshole needs other people.
- Every person has opinions but not every person has knowledge. Should you be allowed to have opinions without knowledge? Can we force other people to acquire knowledge against their will?
- Is there any human ability more important than the power of speech?
- Is it really possible to not care what other people think? Even if a person suffers from a bad reputation, that person is either angry or delighted because of it.
- If a man gets blind drunk every night, does that make him a follower of hedonism or ascetix?
- The health of a commonwealth depends on the motion of commodities. It's the economy, stupid. Or is there more to it than that?
- If you give someone the middle finger, he is offended. But the weird thing is, it's just a middle finger. It is not inherently harmful. The other guy has to choose to be offended by your middle finger.
- Can you put into words the difference between a grimace and a smile? Or is that something that can only be experienced?
- Suppose a guy taught you chess but deliberately taught it wrong. He said that pawns can move diagonally forward but attack straight ahead. Later, you try to play the game with someone else and they tell you that you're playing wrong. But you don't know any better, so you tell them that they're wrong. Over time, you discover that, in fact, you were playing the game wrong the whole time. This is how society works. You learn it

over time through a difficult process of trial and error.

Selfhood

- Sometimes an individual gets so focused on the motives of other people around him that he rarely questions his own motives. Ever do that?
- Humans have foresight, which is a special gift but also a special curse. We have knowledge that the future exists but we do not know its form. This produces both hope and anxiety. Is the knowledge worth it?
- Most people want to get by in life with the least amount of thought. Thinking is rough stuff. Do you think enough? Do you think too much?
- How much of your selfhood is just an act you put on for the benefit of other people?
- A famous question from philosophy: Would you rather be a contented pig or an unhappy human being?
- Do any of us really know how to be happy?
- We have many desires but how many of them are necessary?
- Hobbes divided the powers of a person into natural (might, speed, intellect) and instrumental (wealth, reputation, luck) categories. Which does your character lean on more?
- We eat pizza late at night and this gives us bad dreams. Do all of our mental states have physical causes?
- Kierkegaard said that the first type of despair is despair over earthly matters. The second type of despair is to recognize that the first type of despair is a weakness, and then despair over that weakness. Depressed yet?
- Choice and consciousness are one and the same thing. Therefore, to be conscious of ourselves and to choose ourselves are the same thing. T/F?
- Do you know all the possible sensations of the human body? Can you claim a certain sensation doesn't really exist?
- Just as there is a difference between light and deep sleep, there is a difference between light and deep thinking. But what is that difference?
- Ok, seriously now, why is telling the truth about ourselves such an unpleasant business? We'll tell lies about ourselves even when there's no gain in it! Why!?