

Xeno's Eggs

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Dr Nicholas Nescow was an expert in Common Sense. And no one knew more than he did just how uncommon it was. His work to standardise the parameters of such had been aspirational. He'd received international accreditation for his contribution to the eradication of general ignorance, and the decision to award him a Fellowship had been unanimous.

But this was almost six years ago. And what did he have to show for it? A dingy office in Jessop South, and an honorary subscription to aPriori Magazine. Since then, a poorly invested research grant, an affair with a post-doctoral researcher, and a tragically amicable divorce had left him deflated. He seemed to himself now as unlikely to regain academic prowess as the University was of relieving him of tenure.

If he didn't come up with something soon, something truly earth-shattering, he was fated, like several others on the corridor, to disappear.

Today was Monday. So, just after 10a.m., he slunk to his laptop. This was, he concluded, the most logical place to begin.

Nicholas entered his credentials, and as he waited for the desktop, he happened to glance over at the stack of unopened letters on his desk.

It had been months since he'd thought of VHEM. He'd removed himself from their mailing list, but the page had timed out, so he'd never been sure that his account had been deleted. And here was proof that it hadn't.

He glared at the pamphlet, as though they'd sent it just to spite him.

Nicholas had discovered VHEM one slow afternoon, as a link in a footnote, and when the link wouldn't load, he'd entered 'Voluntary Human Extinction Movement, VHEM' into the browser.

There were 330,000 results, but the first had convinced him. Laid out for all to read, in a modest Times New Roman, was the very doctrine Nicholas had never realised he believed.

Of course, the selection would be random, he wasn't a fascist – nothing like. And common nonsense would remain just as common, but certainly there would be less of it; fewer Toms meant fewer fools, so he'd scrolled to the bottom and clicked 'Subscribe'.

But the disappointment had begun from their very first letter, when he'd learned that the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement was largely a 'state of mind'. While Nicholas was no fascist, he liked actionable commitments and repeatable outcomes that his colleagues would squabble over and the Academy could cite.

VHEM had been no use then, but now here was a reminder that in the months that had elapsed, he'd found nothing better. He thrust the envelope into the shredder and watched with satisfaction as it devoured the quivering oblong, enjoying the final crackle as the plastic-window was consumed.

Nicholas sighed, pushed back the desk, and moved into the kitchen.

The sink was decorated with teaspoons that were either stained or rusted, and the shelves littered with split tea bags and expired sachets of powdered soup. Everything here was either dust or else dusty, and the collection seemed to Nicholas a perfect metaphor for existence.

He tried the cupboard. There were several items: an ancient jam, a crusted Marmite, and booklet of stained instructions for the copying machine, but tucked away on the middle shelf was a jar that caught his attention, two-thirds full with a mirky fluid. He read the label: pickled eggs.

Alone in the kitchen, Nicholas took the jar down from the shelf and counted seven pale orbs floating dismally in the vinegar. He wasn't even hungry, but the jar had piqued his curiosity. Though repulsive, there was something pleasing about the swirling of the liquid, the flecks of celery and mustard seeds, and the jostling of the eggs. And for the first time in years, Nicholas felt the stirring of inspiration. He paused to let the feeling surface and carried the jar to the sink.

While the use-by date had expired, it was seemingly unopened. What he planned to do was wasteful, but if this idea came to fruition, the results would be astronomical.

Struggling with the lid, Nicholas drained the jar of vinegar. And as the acrid odour faded, the experiment commenced.

The jar was now filled with eggs – Nicholas agreed with himself for the moment. But now step two of the procedure would be to fill the gaps with something else. He scanned the worktop for inspiration and snatched a pot of instant rigatoni. He ripped back the lid and tipped the contents in amongst the eggs.

The pasta tumbled into the spaces. Nicholas was delighted. He held the jar up to the window, and let the sunlight find the cracks.

Lentils. Step three was lentils. Nicholas seized the plastic zip lock, left unwittingly by its owner on the window ledge behind the sink.

He poured them in, and as expected, they filtered through the eggs and pasta. He gave the jar a gentle shake and let gravity do the rest.

It was now more full than when he'd started, but there were crevices, still, for something smaller. Maybe pepper from the grinder, then something smaller after that.

Dr Nicholas sprang, jar still in hand, from the kitchen, back towards his office. Flinging himself into his swivel chair, he opened a blank document, poised his fingers above the keyboard, then switched to the email app instead.

He hammered in the address before he realised what he was typing. VHEM wouldn't know what had hit them. Screw the Academy; this was personal.

He'd sort the opener later – something appropriately vengeful. It was what he typed next that mattered. He knew they'd race to read ahead.

‘Given the premise,’ he began, ‘of serial divisibility, one could go on filling a vessel with smaller and smaller objects. And, while the vessel would become fuller, there would always be something smaller one could add to such a vessel to fill the in-betweens.’

He should have stopped there, but he didn’t. Now, he’d paraphrase Xeno:

‘Put another way’, he continued, ‘before a jar reaches capacity, the space between the bottom and the rim must be half-filled. After this, the remaining space must be half-filled again, and again - ad infinitum – with infinitely smaller particles throughout time’s infinite expanse.

‘And given the nature of infinity, this jar would never reach capacity, never achieve *fully*-fullness as traditionally defined.’

They wouldn’t mind him borrowing from Xeno, and if they did, it hardly mattered, because the final deduction, the real thesis, was his own:

‘Given the thingness of things...’ He held down backspace and started over.

‘The capacity to occupy is what makes something an object.’ Good, he thought, that’s the crux of it.

‘And thus, it stands to reason, that since the jar remains unfillable, that the things we understand to be inside it aren’t really things.’

Again, he should have stopped here, but his fingers went on typing.

‘It is of this absent substance that we, ourselves, are made.

‘And in our nothingness, we cannot, therefore, remove ourselves from existence. We cannot cease to be things if we have never truly been.’

Dr Nescow sat back in his chair and read the argument once over, nodding as he read at the perfect track of common sense. He didn’t bother to save a draft, neither did he spell check nor format, and he left the subject field empty, since it could never have been truly filled.

But what he did do was hit send. And then the rest no longer mattered. It never had, nor would again, in this wide universe devoid of things.