

KILROY CAFÉ

Philosophy for the Modern Age

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QUALITY vs. CRAP

The Enduring Struggle of Life

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All around us is crap: crap entertainment, crap products that don't do their job, crap food that isn't good for you, crap politicians saying one thing and doing another, crap "experts" giving crap advice, and good people wasting their lives on crap pursuits.

Where does all this crap come from?

Turns out, crap isn't just a phenomenon of today. It has existed throughout the ages. Nature is full of it. Crap is one reason why species evolve the way they do. Why does a peacock have such ridiculous and useless plumage? It's crap, of course, but the peacock knows, or at least his genes do, that crap sells.

Why does crap happen? Here's a simple case study: The bees and flowers have a mutually beneficial arrangement, right? The bee distributes the flower's pollen, and in exchange for this service, the flower provides the bee with nutritious nectar. To advertise its wares, the flower emits bright colors and enticing aromas to lure the bee in, but it's not exploitation, because both parties win.

But what happens next? Crap steps in! Some flower that produces no nectar learns how to mimic the colors and aroma of the nutritious one. The bee can't tell the difference without testing the flower, and in the process, it picks up the faker's pollen for distribution.

The poor bee wastes his energy for no reward, but from the flower's perspective, why not? Why spend all that energy producing nectar when you can merely *promise* nectar and not

deliver? That's crap in its simplest form.

As the bee learns to detect the difference between flowers, the faker evolves to foil the bee's defenses, so crap is something the bee will always be struggling with. Is the product I'm buying the real thing or a clever fraud? He can't tell the difference without some real-world experience, without making some mistakes and wasting some of his resources on testing. You could call this the "crap tax".

Fast-forward to our own evolutionary state, and we see why crap is everywhere. We all have needs—for food, for meaningful relationships, for labor-saving tools to get us through life. Through our genes and our own past experience, we have come to associate certain signals with the fulfillment of our needs, but as soon as those criteria becomes known, some con artist will start mimicking the signals without solving our underlying problem.

For example, evolution has given us a taste for sugar, salt and fat, which were once rare commodities. Manufacturers respond by giving us exactly what we crave—all sugar, salt and fat—without supplying the nutrition we really need—and why not? That's what the market wants, so that's what it gets.

Wherever a stable signaling system develops, a usurper will try to exploit it. That's largely what modern advertising consists of: the presentation of false signals. They aren't necessarily "lies" because that would be illegal, but advertising is always carefully crafted manipulation where the consumer is rarely getting what he thinks he is.

The opposite of crap is "quality". Quality is something that actually fulfills the underlying need. A quality car is one that gets good gas mileage and runs for years with very little maintenance. A quality relationship is one that really works, not just promises to. Only time can prove quality, but unfortunately our time on Earth is limited, and we may have to run through a lot of crap before we learn what quality really is.

We all have to pay our crap tax.

Quality is rare in the modern world because crap is so much more profitable. Quality is hampered by the fact that it actually has to produce the nectar, not just promise it. The production of quality, in any field, is a lonely business, because the commercial world is probably going to pass you by.

But quality is still the best road. You may have to take a pay cut for quality. You will have to make sacrifices. The personal benefit of quality comes in the long run: in remaining healthy and productive, in being satisfied with yourself and in doing good for the world you leave behind.

There will always be fakers, and they may seem to win, but they usually win in the wrong race, a very short-sighted one. What counts is not the number of bees you've fooled but the nectar you've actually produced.

Over time, quality will usually prevail, but you have to be patient.

—G.C.

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