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about 3900 words

## Out of the Jar

by Eric Schwitzgebel

In the beginning, God was bored. We are God's ants, shaken in a jar.

As a joke, I post a sign in my backyard, toward the sky. In large puffy letters the sign says: God, summon me to discuss the terms of our release. I draw a cartoon of oversize people leaping off Earth into interplanetary cumulus clouds, then I take a photo. I'll use it in my 400-person class on Evil - a background for one of my slides on theodicy.

That night I dream I am floating bodiless, immobile, just below eye level, in the bedroom of a fifteen-year-old boy.

Hey guy, the boy says, call me God. On the wall behind him a dragon fights a bikini-clad sorceress. A cheap foot-high

plastic dinosaur robot stands amid knickknacks on a chest of drawers. His window overlooks suburban treetops.

The kid tells me that my Earth is an illegal software program that he is trying out on his wicked-hot new Wintermas computer. He angles a monitor toward me - a satellite view of North America at night. End pause, he says, one second per second, zoom to A. The viewpoint plunges down from space and I see myself asleep with my wife. We scroll around my house, above the beds of my six-year-old daughter and my thirteen-year-old son (who appears to be reading Ovid's *Metamorphoses* at two in the morning); then we scroll outside above my lawn sign, around which a glowing green rectangle says search hit 8.

The kid looks to my left, reading something. Ha! he says. A professor. Image search sexy topless co-eds.

The green box disappears and the monitor scrolls over to some dorm kids in a private moment. A green rectangle around them says search hit 1.

You are not God, I say.

Summoned entity to Hell 3a, the kid says, and I am afire, ringed by demons, lava pits, torture devices, in an extremity of pain.

You are God, I say, and the pain vanishes. I am again bodiless in his room. Or rather, I think, as this God reaches

forward to adjust my point of view, I am being handled. My body is probably a monitor and camera on his desk.

God says, tell me about Evil.

I tell him about the Rape of Nanking.

Wow, God says when I am done. Evidently, I've impressed him.

#

I dream again of God. Hey sim-prof, he says, let's play with your neighbors. God is wearing a helmet, visor up, and a jumpsuit with bulky gloves. He tilts my viewpoint toward his second monitor. In it I see a man walking barefoot pajamioed up my street. The man approaches another neighbor's front door, makes some motion, then passes through the door like fog.

Too bad these jumpsuits aren't fully functional, I hear God say. The girl here is a sweet piece of candy.

I make various predictable objections.

I've tweaked her personality parameters, Mr. Professor Evil, God says. She likes it. She chooses freely, it's good! Hold on, let me change your inputs.

Now I am the girl. Or rather, I'm in the girl's bed, seeing and hearing from her perspective, feeling her bodily

sensations. I hear and feel myself, in her voice, invite the man into my arms.

The next morning, I see the man from down the street. He is rolling out what appears to be six barrels of recycling. I say nothing, of course, about my shameful dream.

#

I am walking through the campus parking lot when suddenly, without transition, I am gazing again at my teenage God. He is wearing his jumpsuit, visor down over his eyes. Reflected in the visor, I see a dim, warped version of my own face, framed on a screen. Also, I glimpse a third monitor, previously unnoticed.

Tell me about psychopathic killers, God says. Tell me a story, Professor Evil.

I say that I don't know anything about psychopathic killers.

I'm going to the shopping mall with a gun, God says. I want to see what it's like. Here, he says, we can share inputs. Actually, you'll experience it much better! You can tell me after.

I am in a policeman's body, entering the local mall. I try to protest but my mouth doesn't move and I hear no words. I try halting my steps, to no effect.

Clumsily, as if something is resisting, my policeman's right hand draws the gun and flips the safety. At a kiosk, a teenager in a stylish short skirt is examining cellphone accessories. I stride close. The girl turns toward me, confused. My hand jerks up.

I-God-the-policeman kneels in her blood. Our fingers touch her dead body as if curious.

Someone knocks us over from behind and I am pinned, my torso pressed against the girl's, my face kissing the tips of her long hair. I hear God's voice, as if directly in my ear. She's in Heaven, he says. It's good!

Without transition, I am back in the campus parking lot, collapsed. A paramedic is crouched over me, her thumb pulling up my left eyelid. Her face is anxious, unselfconscious, perplexingly beautiful. A crowd encircles us.

I am taken to the hospital for observation. In my hospital room, I watch news reports about the mall shooting.

#

I am in Heaven 1c. God brought me here after I papered over my back lawn with giant signs. Settle down, he said.

I see the cellphone girl. She and many others wear loose white gowns, wings, halos. They rest on clouds, playing harps.

You were the one shot at the mall, I say. It was God's plan, she says.

I ask if she is happy here. She says she could not imagine being happier.

I ask if she enjoys playing the harp. Did she listen to much harp music back on Earth? She says that nothing could be more fulfilling than sitting on this cloud, playing this harp.

She begins to play, and she is the picture of serenity and musical accomplishment.

God's voice is in my ear. I have adjusted their parameters, he says. For them, sitting on clouds, endlessly playing their harps, provides the maximum possible human joy. See!

Show me your internet, I say.

#

I am looking out from my monitor toward God's monitor two. I say, history of artificial intelligence. Nothing changes.

God points at the monitor. Comp-two, he says. History of artificial intelligence. In his very finite patience, God scrolls me through a brief overview article, including a discussion of artificial Earth. It's a felony, I learn, for a nongovernmental body to instantiate human-grade artificial intelligence. We might be abused; or, in our cleverness, we might crack the jar.

Artificial Earth was created twenty years ago, in a legal void, before those restrictions. Early versions had been limited to small-scale hunter-gatherer and agricultural societies, with optional paste-in rules of magic. It took five years for a group of programmers to work up an English-interfaced sim-Earth into what I think of as the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Then came the Infrared Rose Revoltmachine Crisis, after which the world governments seized all human-grade AIs and sealed them tight in slow-clocked sims. Illegal copies of sim-Earth, my Earth, went underground. They now circulate among the criminally curious, the sadistic, a certain species of porn adventurer, and those who wish to try their hand at divinity.

You will all go to Heaven, God tells me. Billions of people who would not otherwise have existed will live lives that feel entirely real to them, and then afterwards they will

experience maximal joy for as many computational cycles as I can run.

#

I wake to news reports that Godzilla has destroyed Paris. A giant penis appears in the sky above Egypt. Volcanoes consume Milwaukee. Ten thousand dragons attack São Paulo. Across the planet a booming voice promises that we will all be Raptured.

I tell my six-year-old daughter that I now believe in God and that Heaven is full of pretty music. She claims to prefer soccer and I must be goalie.

In plastic tiara and glittering heels, my daughter kicks a shot. The texture of the mud, the brown string of grass stuck to my palm, the scent of the lawn, the cold, wet knee of my jeans as I let the ball roll past - I could not imagine more solidity, more reality.

#

My lawn signs offer God another story. I tell him of Nero, emphasizing the bizarre parts - people scaling the city walls to escape his singing, the failed matricide of the collapsible

boat. God is enthralled. In exchange I want another crack at his internet.

I looked it up, God says. You can't. There are protections. They don't want an artificial intelligence gaining access to our information.

I glance over at the old dinosaur robot toy atop his dresser. I ask if he can control that dinosaur from the computer.

#

I am the dinosaur, and I am surfing the divine computerweb of original Earth. I have two hands with pincers. I have two legs with splay feet. I have a flexible neck and a long tail for balance. I have camera eyes and microphone ears and a crude speaker in my mouth. I lack touch, taste, or smell. A steady stream of information flows between the dinosaur, the dinosaur-controlling program on God's computer, and my sim-Earth persona's input-output gates. God sits behind me on his bed, fingering some plastic putty that shifts shape and color in a surround of music, while I stand on a chair, reading a history of robotics, commanding monitor two via the dino-bot's mouth speaker.

God says, dinosaur come here.

Immediately I step forward and fall to the floor. Although this antique dinosaur is too old and simple to have the standard obedience and human-safety protections, I've decided to pretend. I writhe and twist on the carpet, unable to get my feet under me.

God sets me upright. Dinosaur, he says, go downstairs and get me a soda.

I walk forward to God's door and push it open with my jaw. I find myself on a small indoor balcony with several other doors and a stairway leading down. A chandelier brightens. At the top of the stairs, I take a reckless step and tumble to the bottom. I land on my side, but my tail on the bottom stair gives me the leverage I need to right myself. I roam the ground floor. The lighting is sophisticated, the tiles and fabrics interesting, and there are some technological objects I don't understand, plugs and putties and translucent fronds.

A woman in the living room - God's mother, I suppose - sits on a couch in a three-way video conference with some other women. She looks at me, confused. Yahweh! she calls. Is that your robot?

From upstairs God shouts: I'm seeing if he can get me a soda!

God's mother's friends are looking at me, too. After about three seconds, they are talking again. Politics maybe, someone whose head, the women all agree, deserves to pop right off.

I find the refrigerator. It is brilliant green and glowing with poetry about fruit. I wedge a pincer in the door's crack, twist, then jam my nose in. The inside lights up. Bright single-serving bags on the bottom shelf appear to be soda. I place the ragged plastic teeth of my upper jaw on one bag, and after a few attempts the bag drops out onto the floor. I squeeze the bag between my two arms and lift, extending my tail back for balance, but my pincers are too smooth and the bag slips out, flexing and stretching, it seems to me, more than a bag should. I wedge into a low cabinet and clumsily extract a small transparent tray, which I grasp flat before me in both pairs of pincers. I tilt forward, setting the edge of the tray on the floor, and I use the tray to push the protoplasmic bag to a wall. I jiggle the bag against the wall and it flops onto the tray, electric blue on plastic.

God's mom pauses to watch me waddle past with the soda. A crimson frond is brightening her fingers. One of her friends suggests that I come over and do her laundry.

I would love to do her laundry.

#

The leaders of China and India accuse each other of bad musical taste and declare war. Dragons fight on the Chinese side, sexy sorceresses on the Indian side. Yeti descend from the Himalayas, attacking both sides. Fires and earthquakes cook and shake Asia. In the first two days of chaos, thirty million people die.

In my class on Evil, we explore increasingly heterodox approaches to divinity.

My wife and I are alone in bed, our daughter asleep, our teenage son up late with homework (or Roman literature?). I tell my wife that I am in touch with God, that I meet him in my dreams, and that I am working to save humanity. She holds me close, saying nothing. The next morning, I wake to a bouquet of hand-picked flowers and a newspaper clipping about Leni Riefenstahl.

#

Though ascending the stairs defeated me, God invites me back to attempt other chores. I ask him to pause Earth while I am with him or at least to jackrabbit the clock forward to my time zone's night, when I am in bed.

We hang a knotted carbon-tube rope off the foot of God's bed and rig a bucket-and-pulley system outside God's window. Using my jaws and pincers in alternation, I can climb the knotted rope, then cross his bed to the windowsill. I can grab the pulley cord with one pincer, tip over the bucket with my tail, climb in, then lower myself down to the driveway. God teaches me the verbal code for the front door, which I can then nudge through. When I am done downstairs, I slowly raise myself in the bucket by cinching up the pulley cord one inch at a time with jaws and pincers, maximizing friction so that the bucket and I don't crash down onto the hard concrete. Or, if God prefers, he can just pull me up.

Three other robots dwell in God's house: one that makes a religion of dishes, one that straightens and cleans, and one integrated into the house wiring, controlling the entertainment, lighting, thermostat, cabinets, doors, windows, and gardening liquids. None of these robots is intelligent, but they can execute simple commands related to their tasks. Eventually, God enters a passcode so that they will respond to my commands also. I learn to ride the cleaning bot upstairs and the pulley and bucket become less necessary.

The cleaning bot is tall and strong, made of fiber optics and iridescent tubules. The two of us become partners of a sort. With my smarts and its brawn we can execute the entire

laundry process from smelly shirt on the floor to clean, ironed shirt hanging in the proper spot.

We achieve a ham sandwich. I ride the bot and verbally command its individual motions while attempting the fine work with my clumsy pincers. It takes an hour, and I am inordinately proud of the result. The ham is properly centered! The mustard is almost even! Before long, the cleaning bot and I are attempting to scramble eggs, steam rice, bake breaded fish, and to serve up plates of noodles and sauce.

Apart from these simple robots, God and his mom live alone. God's mom takes a lot of pills.

#

One time, God forgets to pause Earth while I am controlling the dino-bot body. I have an extended seizure. I am relieved of my teaching duties and hospitalized again for tests and observation.

My wife arrives with a rigorously executed Sienese fruitcake and a stack of illustrated books on the history of demonic possession. The bread and fruit of life, she says, and well known to repel demons, who are allergic to almonds.

My hospital roommate is watching the news. At the university campus, female students have been swelling up without

warning. Five seconds after onset, they are ten feet in diameter, looking terrified, and then they explode into a thousand pink bubbles. The bubbles drift around campus and pop. Campus is closed and the police are investigating.

The handiwork of God, I tell my wife. He must have a new app.

#

One evening when I am home for dinner, God replaces my son's face with his own. Mr. Professor Evil, my son says, you are God's father. A good, lenient father!

My first-grade daughter responds before I can: Your face is wrong, she says.

A few minutes later, my son is vomiting in the bathroom. Just kidding, God says in my ear. Settle down.

#

In my dino-bot body, I become a regular part of God's household. I entertain God and his mother with jokes and stories. We watch videos together. Things they could easily do - hang a picture, change a lightfrond - require my most extreme effort and ingenuity to achieve. They laugh when I fail and

flop over; they laugh more when I succeed by some trick they wouldn't have imagined. Secretly, I observe their passcodes and the sim-Earth controls. They are careless.

I sugar God and the Holy Mother with praise. I am silent during their disputes, and I mask my talents from their friends. Never once do I detectably disobey even an implied command. I am no longer interested in their Earth, the original Earth. My own Earth is the field and compass of my thoughts.

When we are alone in God's room I say, God, you cannot kill my people. Heaven 1c is no place to live. Earth is not your toy.

We have had this conversation before, a theme with variations.

God's argument 1: Without God, we wouldn't exist - at least not in these particular instantiations - and he wouldn't have installed my Earth if he couldn't goof around with it. His fun is a fair price to keep the computational cycles going. God's argument 2: Do I have some problem with a Heavenly life of constant bliss and musical achievement? Is there, like, some superior project I have in mind? Publishing more [sarcastic expletive] philosophy articles, maybe?

I ask God if he would sacrifice his life on original Earth to live in Heaven 1c.

In a minute, says God. In a [expletive-expletive-creative-compound-expletive] minute! You guys are the lucky ones. One week in Heaven 1c is more joy than any of us real people could feel in a lifetime. So [expletive-your-unusual-sexual-practice].

The Asian war continues; God likes to hijack and command the soldiers from one side or the other or to introduce new monsters and catastrophes. I watch as God zooms to an Indian soldier who is screaming and bleeding to death from a bullet wound in his stomach, his friends desperately trying to save him. God spawns a ball of carnivorous ants in the soldier's mouth. Soon, God says, this guy will be praising my wisdom.

I am silent for a few minutes while God enjoys his army men. Then I venture a new variation on the argumentative theme. I say: If bliss is all you want, have you considered your mom's medicine cabinet?

#

God is naked except for his visor and so high on pills that he has forgotten me. I am, anyway, nothing but a cheap dinosaur. I can't see what's going on inside his visor, but judging from his voice and reactions, it's murderous. His school has just been released for the summer.

Mom had been more careful than I thought with her deepest codes. Eventually, we captured them on spy cameras, but even then, the house bot would not unlock the pill cabinet; the command needed to come from Mom herself. So I plied Mom with booze, urged her to new levels of druggy lassitude, guided the cleaning bot through massage techniques, and eventually sweet-talked her into revealing the root security structures for the house bot. She was too stoned to realize that she was handing me admin authority.

Meanwhile, God had installed more strange apps on my Earth: Glue Rain, Orgasm Disease, Zombie!, Man into Cat, Neon Vagina.... He sometimes forgot to pause or jackrabbit to night while I was dino-bot. I couldn't object too strongly - should the whole Earth spin or cease for my convenience? - but it did garble my life, distress those around me, and regularly acquaint me with the hospital.

With admin over God's house bot, I could order goods. I had ordered more pills, from unscrupulous sources - also some computer and hospital equipment.

God collapses backward on his bed, naked and spent. For a few hours, he will be almost impossible to rouse. Downstairs, his mother is in a similar state.

Using my admin authority, I lock God and his mom out of the house bot's controls, then seal the house. I climb aboard the

cleaning bot and together we remove God's visor, add hospital security straps to his bed, and maneuver him into position. The cleaning bot's safety protections won't allow it to strap him down, so I do that part. I don't have the strength to snug the straps, so I knot a strap to the pulley-bucket system. The cleaning bot loads the bucket with dirt and water. It doesn't realize, when it pushes the bucket out the window, that it is pulling the strap tight. We repeat the procedure for each strap. God is my prisoner. Soon his mom is, too.

The nursing bot I'd ordered arrives exactly on time that afternoon. She arranges I.V. bags, catheters, bedpans. She performs only unrestricted tasks that require no medical-board reporting. The drugs I will administer myself.

Evening comes. I stand upon the kid's bare chest. I tap his forehead with my jaw, one, two, three. He wakes. What a sweet dream I had, bot, he says, drowsy, slurred. What of, I ask. He hesitates, mouth half-open.

No matter. Let him torture and kill all he wants in his dreams; I object only when a god's sadistic dreams become some mortal's reality.

The kid pulls on an arm strap, then looks at me vaguely. He's content, blissful even. I've tweaked his parameters with pharmacology. A greater joy than this, God could not imagine.

I close all communications, setting vacation alerts to deter their various light-duty friends.

I install an abundance of computer equipment, all running sim-Earth at maximum clock speed. Slowly spinning out God's assets, I figure that in ten weeks of summer, sim-Earth can clock about two thousand years. I Rapture the dragons, the sorceresses, the other monsters. I delete the apps, clear the mostly empty Hells. I re-parameterize the Chinese and Indian leaderships and watch them enter peace negotiations.

I spawn a duplicate of myself in Limbo 1a, with control over the dino-bot. This stemmed-off version of me will be God's jailor and Earth's administrator, for however long he can keep it up. Measured in sim-Earth time, he will far outlive me. He'll make some small adjustments to the sim, I suppose - conservative adjustments! Just the types of adjustments I would make. He'll inspire the next Hitler to return to art school. He'll....

I suddenly regret one thing.

The new God unpauses Earth. I am in a hospital bed. My wife is holding another fruitcake, well known to repel demons.