

## Our Debt to Vulcan

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A colossal lonely figure stands glistening in the middle of the Ngorongoro Crater in Tanzania. The vast plain stretches for miles in all directions and is populated by rhinos, elephants, wildebeest and lions. But the towering sculpture at the heart of the crater is a monument not to the natural but to the man made.

Why Africa for this shrine? It was felt that such a monument should be placed not alongside a city or a town but should reign over flora and fauna at the birthplace of humanity, the place where humans first put nature on the back foot.

Every day hordes of school children from around the world arrive at the crater on a sort of pilgrimage. They are here to learn the greatest story ever told, that of the rise and fall of the human will.

Dwarfed by the hulking sculpture, some children look up in awe, squinting their eyes to avoid the painful reflection of burning sun on Vulcan's massive torso. Some of the younger children try to climb up onto his enormous foot but slip back down the welded steel and ultimately give up.

With a hammer in one hand, Vulcan powerfully makes giant strides across the savannah as if inspired by some great purpose. His face, although human is like a machine, shiny and metallic, and this leaves him inscrutable. If one had been raised without contact with other people and saw this massive effigy of a man-machine, one would wonder what this giant's goal was.

But all the children know the story of Vulcan. Born with disability that left him lame, Vulcan had intellectual and creative talents that the world had never before seen.

He immersed himself in learning; easily grasping the complexities of such diverse subjects as philosophy, physics, psychology. However, it was his work in the applied fields of computing and genetics that would lead him to his momentous leap to freedom. Or on a different view, his pathetic descent to serfdom.

Vulcan began his creative period by assembling fantastic automata that could cook, clean, and provide companionship to their owners. He produced powerful medicines to heal the sick and created beautiful artworks that illuminated the human condition and lifted the spirit.

Hailed by the world as a hero or even a god, it seemed that Vulcan could do anything he wanted. When he wanted leg to heal he installed machinery into his knee joint. Such repair work was not enough and he started to augment himself, using cold, shining steel to improve upon unimpaired parts of his body and thus he turned himself into a cyborg.

But it was at this point where a rupture occurs in the story and things start to take a quite different direction.

Vulcan's attention had started to drift from the world, to his body but now it turned inwards towards his will. Some say he had begun to see his own will as an impediment to getting what he wanted or even as something that tormented rather than helped him. Others say he was just bored of the world and found more of interest when he looked inward.

Vulcan's growing power had seemed to leave him more and more indecisive. Sometimes he appeared paralysed under the weight of a decision. People wondered if the moral burden that accompanied his awesome capacities had become too much for him. However at times he seemed to grind to a halt unable to make the most trivial decision. He would obsessively repeat bad decisions and at times he was overcome by regret over earlier choices.

By this point he was becoming anguished, confused and more and more reclusive. His wife had left him and the historical record of his life starts to fade but for one last entry. This was not just the most significant event of his life but the most momentous development in all of history.

Vulcan's last creation was the liberator.

The liberator was a minute device that Vulcan installed into his brain with the purpose of making decisions for him. Of course, people have always used devices to resolve indecision, the idea of flipping a coin to decide on a course of action is nothing new. However the genius of the liberator and the thing that set it apart from a tossed coin was that the decision was based on Vulcan's values and not pure chance.

The way that this first ever liberator operated was influenced by old fashioned internet search technology; it crawled around the brain from neuron to neuron downloading a complete picture of Vulcan's values. How important is humour? Is it important to act altruistically? Are tangy flavours desirable? Are cold sunny days preferable to warm sunny days? All this information about Vulcan's preferences was sent back and stored on his liberator. Of course indecision was

still possible and it was necessary for the software to have a way of choosing between apples and pears where nothing in Vulcan's value system preferred one to the other. Only these kind of decisions were made randomly (Vulcan ensured his liberator was networked to a remote Geiger counter to create real randomness in his decision making process where necessary).

The technology could even improve on itself. When the liberator decided that he should not call his wife but, later he felt this was not the right decision and he really needed to try to re-establish contact, the liberator's software updated his value set to take account of this new information. And so he called her but the call was not answered.

Vulcan spent periods of time with his liberator switched on and periods of time with it off but this in itself brought him disquiet. He started to feel indecisive about whether to have the device on or off or how long to have it on for ( he would switch it on using a timer in order that it cut out 24 hours later).

Over a period of about 6 months the liberator had gradually become more and more successful in deciding for him. He was generally happy with its decisions and came to regard them as better than his own. In time, the liberator generated initiatives that helped him to bring his beloved wife back.

It is not hard to imagine the end point of this project and one can regard his last biological decision as his most courageous or his most cowardly. The course of history was changed when Vulcan turned switched the device on permanently.

This meant that any decision to switch the liberator off (if this were ever to happen) would be taken by the liberator.

But of course the school children know all of this. They all have their own liberators installed, as do the most of the teachers. Now liberators come in many different varieties, some wholly installed in the brain, others in distant locations but networked to the brain. One or two of the older teachers sometimes grumble that nowadays no one has free will and that everything important in life is lost but for the most part people are happy with the new world.

And so they come to Ngorongoro Crater to acknowledge the enormous debt owed to the man who freed us by ending our freedom.