

durability. What's most useful about it is precisely what makes it such a problem. And we keep making more of the stuff, year after year, decade after decade. Consider this fact: Of all the plastic created, since mass production began, more than half of it has been produced since 2000. We can throw it away, we can fool ourselves into thinking we're "recycling" it, but it will not absent itself. It will show up again, in the food we eat and the water we drink. It will haunt the milk that infants suckle from their mothers' breasts. Like a repressed memory, it remains, unalterable by time.

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12. [...] As I type these words, my fingertips are pressing down on the plastic keys of my laptop; the seat I'm sitting on is cushioned with some kind of faux-leather-effect polymer; even the gentle ambient music I'm listening to as I write is being pumped directly to my cochleas by way of plastic Bluetooth earphones. These things may not be a particularly serious immediate source of microplastics. But some time after they reach the end of their usefulness, you and I may wind up consuming them as tiny fragments in the water supply. In the ocean, polymers contained in paint are the largest source of these particles, while on land, dust from tires, and tiny plastic fibers from things like carpets and clothing, are among the main contributors.

13. In 2019, a study commissioned by the World Wide Fund for Nature found that the average person may be consuming as much as five grams of plastic every week — the equivalent, as the report's authors put it, of an entire credit card. The wording was somewhat vague; if we *may* be consuming the equivalent of a credit card, we can assume that we may equally be consuming much less. But the report was widely circulated in the media, and its startling claims captured an anxious public imagination. The choice of the credit card as an image had some role to play here; the idea that we are eating our own purchasing power, that we might be poisoning ourselves with our insistent consumerism, burrows into the unconscious like a surrealist conceit. When I think of it, I can't help picturing myself putting my Visa card in a blender and adding it to a smoothie.

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14. As a parent, I am suspended between the desire to shield my children from microplastics — along with all the other things I want to shield them from — and the suspicion that the effort might be largely futile. A quick Google search revealed that these anxieties are increasingly common among parents and are the subject of a growing abundance of online content. In one article about protecting kids from microplastics, I read that the snuggling of soft toys in bed is to be avoided, and that such unexpectedly menacing beasts, rather than being left lying around the room or in the child's bed, should be kept safely in a toy chest. (Later in the same article, the environmental scientist who makes this recommendation also counsels against instilling fear in our children.) As much as I would like to minimize ambient threats to my children's health, I also don't

especially want to be the kind of parent who insists on their soft toys being stored safely in a chest when not in use — because of all the ambient threats to my children, the one I am most keen to offset is my own neurosis.

15. And although concern about microplastics is obviously compatible with the larger discourses of environmentalism and anti-consumerism, it's not exclusively of interest to lefty, liberal types like myself. Joe Rogan, perhaps our culture's foremost vector of meathead masculinity, has been talking about the topic for several years. In an episode of his podcast last year, Mr. Rogan expressed concern about an alarming effect of phthalates, a chemical used to increase the durability of plastics, in human bloodstreams: Babies, he said, were being born with smaller "taints." (The taint, he clarified, was the distance between one's penis and one's anus.)
16. Not only were the taints of infants shrinking at an alarming rate; so, too, were penises and testicles themselves. "This is wild," he said, "because it's literally changing the hormonal profile and the reproductive systems of human beings, and making us weaker, making us less masculine." A guest pointed out that there was something of a **trade-off** at play, in that while living in the modern world meant unprecedented exposure to such chemicals, it also meant living much longer. "Sort of," said Mr. Rogan, "but you live like a bitch." Just as climate change and pollution are the traditional concerns of the left, the demographic effects of falling birthrates are a source of anxiety to conservatives. Whatever your preferred apocalyptic scenario, in other words, microplastics have it covered.
17. Microplastics have established themselves in the cultural bloodstream, and their prevalence in the zeitgeist can partly be accounted for by our uncertainty as to what it means, from the point of view of pathology, that we are increasingly filled with plastic. This ambiguity allows us to ascribe all manner of malaises, both cultural and personal, to this new information about ourselves. The whole thing has a strangely allegorical resonance. We feel ourselves to be psychically disfigured, corrupted in our souls, by a steady diet of techno-capitalism's figurative trash — by the abysmal scroll of inane TikToks and brainless takes, by Instagram influencers pointing at text boxes while doing little dances, by the endless proliferation of A.I.-generated junk content. We feel our faith in the very concept of the future liquefying at broadly the same rate as the polar ice caps. The idea of microscopic bits of trash crossing the blood-brain barrier feels like an apt and timely entry into the annals of the apocalyptic imaginary.
18. And the aura of scientific indeterminacy that surrounds the subject — maybe this stuff is causing unimaginable damage to our bodies and minds; then again, maybe it's fine — lends it a slightly hysterical cast. We don't know what these plastics are doing to us, and so there is no end to the maladies we might plausibly ascribe to them. Maybe it's microplastics that are making you depressed. Maybe

it's because of microplastics that you have had a head cold constantly since Christmas. Maybe it's microplastics that are stopping you and your partner from conceiving, or making you lazy and lethargic, or forgetful beyond your years. Maybe it's microplastics that caused the cancer in your stomach, or your brain.

19. I myself am susceptible to this tendency. A few years back, I was diagnosed with I.B.D., a chronic autoimmune condition. As is typically the way of such ailments, it came out of nowhere, with no known cause. It's not life-threatening, but there have been periods when it has made me ill enough to be unable to work for a week or two at a stretch, and when I have been so tired I could barely haul myself off the couch to go to bed at night. Every eight weeks, I present myself at a hospital infusion suite, where I am hooked up to a bag containing a liquid solution of a monoclonal antibody. (These bags are, of course, made from some kind of polyethylene, a fact that you must imagine me relating with an elaborate shrug, indicating great reserves of stoic irony.)
20. In 2021, a study published in the journal Environmental Science and Technology found significantly higher levels of microplastics in the stool* samples of people who were diagnosed with I.B.D., but who were otherwise healthy, than those without I.B.D. No direct causation was established, but given that earlier studies conducted on laboratory animals established microplastic ingestion as a cause of intestinal inflammation, it seems not unreasonable to assume that there might be some link.

**stool – échantillon de selles*

21. The more time I spent researching this essay, the more I found myself wondering whether microplastics might be at the root of my condition. My point here is not to make a factual claim either way, because I just don't know enough to do so. My point, in fact, is precisely that the not knowing generates its own peculiar energy. I think it's at least plausible that my illness might be caused by microplastics, but it's also equally plausible that it might not. And I am aware that this ambiguity is itself strangely seductive, that it is on such epistemological wasteland that great, rickety edifices of conspiracy and conjecture are raised.
22. Until we know a good deal more than we currently do, at least, talking about microplastics can feel weirdly like holding forth on the harmful effects of cellphone radiation. [...] The time will come, sooner or later, when we know what microplastics are doing to us, but until then the subject remains an ambiguous one, and therefore a richly suggestive one.
23. But isn't there something obviously absurd in the claim that we don't know whether we are being harmed by the plastic in our blood? What standards of harm are these, that we must await the test results before deciding how concerned to be about the thousands of little fragments of trash pulsing through our veins? Surely the fact of their presence is alarming enough in itself; and surely

this presence, in any case, registers at least as strongly on a psychic as on a physiological level.

24. Among the most indelibly distressing images of the damage done to nature by our heedless, relentless consumption of plastic is a series of photographs by the artist Chris Jordan, entitled "Midway: Message From the Gyre." Each of these photographs depicts the body of an albatross in some or other state of advanced decomposition. At the center of each splayed and desiccated carcass is the clustered miscellany of plastic objects the bird had consumed before dying. The horror of these images is in the surreal juxtaposition of organic and inorganic elements, the sheer bewildering volume of plastic contained in their digestive tracts. The bodies of these once beautiful creatures are returning slowly to the earth, but the human trash that sickened them remains inviolable, unalterable by time: toothpaste lids, bottle caps, entire cigarette lighters that look as if they would still work perfectly well, tiny little children's dolls and a thousand other unidentifiable traces of our deranged productivity and heedless hunger.

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