

**Global Indigenous
Philosophy:
Remembering the “Us” (in
The Last of Us)**

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Global Indigenous Philosophy: Remembering the “Us”

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HBO’s *The Last of Us* begins with Dr. Neuman speculating that some zombie-ant fungus could evolve and spread to humans. The fungus makes ants climb trees where they sprout spores that rain onto new victims. If transmitted to people, Dr. Neuman frets the result would be “billions of puppets with poisoned minds permanently fixed on one unifying goal: to spread the infection...”

Now, we have fungal yeast and bacteria in us that affects our brains, and there's a pathogen that leads rodents (and humans) to behave riskily, making them easier prey for felines, inside of which the parasite reproduces.¹ But *The Last of Us* isn’t solely about fungus-driven zombification. It also explores the contagion of ideas. Whether it’s the fanaticism of FEDRA, the Fireflies, or David’s cult, people become mindlessly obedient to the agendas of larger groups.

Does *The Last of Us* infect the viewer and gamer with a populist American ideology that elevates individuals over communities? With the complicated exception of the Jackson Community, the other collectives are mind-numbingly authoritarian. Despite occasional moralizing about Joel’s or Henry’s past misdeeds, we root for their survival, even if it means killing members of collectives. And let’s not forget the main antagonist is the fungus, which dehumanizes the Infected by pulling them into a violent hive mind.

Collective existence isn’t inherently dehumanizing though. Communities form the basis for importantly human traits like language, cooking, political reasoning, advanced tools, and religion.² In fact, Indigenous traditions from around the globe suggest that the individual “I” originates in the collective “us,” and these perspectives shaped founding American philosophies.³ Because *The Last of Us* celebrates popular American values, which are rooted not just in traditions stressing individual

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self-sufficiency, but those emphasizing collective existence, it invites explorations about whether humans can truly thrive in isolation or whether individual flourishing necessitates communities.

Now They Come

In real life, stinkhorn mushrooms crack through pavement, and *The Last of Us* depicts a fungus crunching through a basement floor. Like the depiction in the show, some fungus species hunt tiny worms with adhesive nets or by spearing them with spores that germinate into their bodies. In nature, fungal networks can span miles, sometimes using chemical impulses for rapid communication, and researchers are experimenting with mushroom computing.⁴ The HBO series echoes this notion of communication when Ellie observes the Infected are “connected.” Tess confirms the fungus “grows underground,” with “long fibers like wires, some of them stretching over a mile,” so that “Now, you step on a patch of Cordyceps in one place, and you can wake a dozen Infected from somewhere else. Now they know where you are. Now they come.”

In Episode 2, Cordyceps grow around an infected man that Joel has shot, signaling the diseased hoard outside, which surges in to hunt for new hosts. The setting is the Massachusetts State House, a real building in Boston. Boston was the location of one of the first major battles of the American Revolution. So, Boston is a symbol of American independence and contrasts the grotesque fungus that coordinates the Infected into mindless group violence.

Just in case we miss the contrast, there’s a second scene in a Boston museum dedicated to the American Revolution. The museum is overrun by fungal growth and Infected, reflecting long-standing anxieties about collectivist ideologies infiltrating the United States. To drive the point home, a bust of Benjamin Franklin topples when Joel fights the Infected. Before that, the camera sweeps across what may be a fallen sculpture of George Washington, with mushrooms protruding

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from its head. These images place American independence in opposition to collectivism, which is represented as a disease.

It's after the museum scene that Ellie, Joel, and Tess end up in the Massachusetts State House. The Infected attack, and Tess—who's recently been bitten—blows herself up to prevent the hoard from getting to Joel and Ellie. The Massachusetts State House, a historic symbol of the American way of life—erected shortly after the War of Independence—literally fractures. Still, the mind-rotting fungal collective doesn't win. The episode's last shot affirms the perseverance of America's victory over the collective ideals by showing Ellie standing alone in front of the ruined State House, which implausibly has an American flag waving on its roof, though the apocalypse is into its twentieth year.

Don't Tread on Me!

In the HBO version of *The Last of Us*, most characters are morally ambiguous, if not irredeemably bad. However, some characters, like Bill, are depicted as good without qualification. Bill, who embraces an individualistic libertarian philosophy never kills innocent people, tortures anyone for information, or eats those he captures.

In the United States, libertarianism traces to the Founding Fathers. But their views were possibly shaped by Indigenous Americans and definitely by Chinese ideas.⁵ The libertarianism of the Founding Fathers diverges from today's popularly extolled versions. Though ironic because many Founding Fathers owned slaves, libertarianism prizes individual freedoms on the grounds that we want to do different things, so that the only shared wish is to pursue our individual interests without interference. Libertarians defend negative rights: the idea we're free to do anything that's not unjust, anything that does not interfere with others. Typically, libertarianism leads to a preference for small government because state authorities have historically interfered with freedom.

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The concern over strong governments is humorously highlighted when Frank complains that Bill lives in “a psycho bunker where 9/11 was an inside job, and the government are all Nazis.” Bill screams, “The government *are all* Nazis!” to which Frank concedes, “Well, yeah now, but not then!”

The Gadsden flag, with the motto “Don’t Tread on Me,” is a libertarian emblem from the American Revolutionary period, and Bill has one in his workshop. Offensive speech doesn’t count as treading on rights, but physical harm or theft do, and we’re allowed to resist perpetrators. Libertarians also assert that mixing labor with unowned items makes them ours, like gathering apples from unclaimed land or purchasing items with our earnings.

Bill mostly upholds these principles. Instead of stealing, he merely salvages leftovers after the town is abandoned, akin to picking apples from an unowned tree. When he kills, it’s because raiders are intent on murdering and robbing him. He’s also within his libertarian rights to eliminate the Infected, who are aggressors and no longer people.

In the HBO series, Frank ends up in a hidden pit Bill has dug outside of his fenced perimeter. He’s unharmed, and Bill releases him, though initially refusing to provide food. Charity is not mandatory for libertarians, but not releasing somebody who wasn’t committing a wrong would be immoral. Bill eventually invites Frank for a meal, and their romantic relationship begins, aligning with libertarianism’s support for free sexual expression between consenting adults. Their suicides also fit typical libertarian prescriptions which see voluntary euthanasia as an individual right. (For more on the moral permissibility of suicide, see Chapter ???).

At the same time, Bill’s psycho-bunker mentality contradicts the views of the Founding Fathers. Thomas Paine (1737—1809) extolled the moral teachings of Confucius (c. 551—479 BCE), equating them to those of Jesus,⁶ which violate conventional libertarianism by mandating

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charity. Thomas Jefferson (1743—1826) also appreciated Confucius’s teachings, which Benjamin Franklin (1706—1790) published in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*.⁷ Although Confucius’s push for meritocracy fits libertarianism, his elevation of social goods over individual ones doesn’t. And neither does Jefferson’s mirroring proposal that university education be provided “at the common expense of all.”⁸ The reason is that today’s libertarians overwhelmingly believe that using tax dollars for social goods like education is forced charity or theft.

John Adams (1735—1826) also stressed “Public virtue”⁹ and valued Confucian texts. These texts equate “public virtue” to “humaneness” by using a word (*ren*, 仁), that combines the Chinese characters for “person” (人) and “two” (二). Before the outbreak, Bill believed that the presence of more than one person necessitated rights to prevent harm from others. Paradoxically, he could only fulfill his libertarian duties to avoid harm when his community shrank to just one person, and the need for rights vanished.

After all, Frank was outside Bill’s fenced area, not attempting burglary or property violation, so his confinement in the hole violates his libertarian rights. Frank additionally could have broken his neck in the pit or been killed by the same flamethrowers the raiders later set off. In short, Bill is only able to *mostly* uphold libertarian principles because he’s in an extremely improbable situation that has removed almost all people and because Frank was lucky enough not to die or get injured.

Hunkering in a Psycho Bunker

It’s not coincidental that Bill and Frank live in Lincoln, Massachusetts, named after a President celebrated for defending liberty. Lincoln is a five-minute drive from Walden Pond, famous for the cabin Henry David Thoreau (1817—1862) built there. Thoreau later published a book about Walden Pond, along with other writings like the libertarian tract, “Resistance to Civil Government.”

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Bill's isolation surpasses Thoreau's. *Walden* opens by saying that Thoreau lived but "a mile from any neighbor" in a dwelling he erected "on the shore of Walden Pond, in Concord," a town near Boston.¹⁰ Thoreau and Bill believe we don't have to help others unless we're contributing to their oppression. A difference in their philosophical positions, however, is that Bill sides with libertarians like the contemporary philosopher, Jan Narveson, who think it's "happily unusual" that we harm people far away,¹¹ whereas Thoreau saw it as common. He said the Northern economy supported Southern slavery. Today, he'd see our carbon emissions as harming uncontacted Amazonian tribes. He'd also regard Bill's bunker mentality as delusional because affecting others is unavoidable.

While Bill's bunker mindset conforms to survivalist stereotypes, his refined culinary and musical tastes defy them. Similarly, Thoreau challenges our expectations by bringing ancient Asian books into the woods at Walden. While there, he translated Confucian texts from the available French, which talk about the interrelation between individuals and society. He cherished the Bhagavad Gita, which equates enlightenment to unity with the cosmos or the divine, a viewpoint echoed in Islamic Sufism. Before going to Walden, he helped publish part of the *Lotus Sutra*, a Chinese Buddhist scripture, highlighting that things are interconnected, akin to the networked fungus in *The Last of Us*, but without the terror. Maybe Thoreau was also exposed to Daoist thinking, where *yin* and *yang* symbolize the unity of contraries, as when presence and void comprise a valley or individual rights only gain meaning in communities.

Like the fungus which spread through contaminated food shipments, these philosophical views circulated along ancient trade routes connecting places such as Asia and Africa. A sub-Saharan perspective that's also found in North Africa is expressed in John Mbiti's (1931—2019) statement: "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am."¹² Mbiti's statement fit the fact

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that language, morality, cooking, advanced tool use, religion, and other importantly human traits are enculturated. So, we can't realize our humanity in isolation. As Desmond Tutu (1931—2021) declared: “the solitary human being is a contradiction in terms.”¹³ One similarly finds Indigenous Americans claiming that all things are “animate and interconnected,”¹⁴ a view that usually implies “the collective embodiment of the clanship experiences.”¹⁵

In *The Last of Us*, the characters we root for learn of our deep interconnectedness in a limited way. Love for Sam shapes Henry's identity, and he kills himself when his brother dies. Joel's life revolves around his daughter, Sarah, and he attempted suicide after her death. Ellie becomes a surrogate daughter, and Joel makes increasing sacrifices for her. Bill's life changes when Frank arrives. Later, Frank wishes to die due to irreversible illness, and Bill respects his choice. Unbeknownst to Frank, Bill adds a fatal dose of sedative to his wine, saying, “I'm old. I'm satisfied. And you were my purpose.”

It's Like a Spaceship

After falling in love with Frank, Bill's perspective shifts from a “world vs. me” mentality to a “world vs. the two of us” mindset. In a suicide note to Joel, Bill reflects, “I used to hate the world, and I was happy when everyone died. But I was wrong because there was one person worth saving. That's what I did. I saved him. Then I protected him.” Bill concludes: “That's why men like you and me are here. We have a job to do. And God help any motherfuckers who stand in our way.”

In *The Last of Us*, however, there's one attempt to explore the possibility of groups having moral precedence over individuals. It's revealed that Ellie has had Cordyceps in her brain since birth, which produces a chemical signal protecting her from harmful infections. The Fireflies plan to create a vaccine by cutting the fungus from Ellie's brain and killing her. They've kept her sedated and unaware of what's planned to prevent psychological suffering. The Firefly leader, Marlene,

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insists the procedure must happen for the *collective* good. Joel argues against it, aligning with a rights view that opposes killing Ellie without her consent and treating her as a mere object.

How, it may be asked, do the doctors know for certain they can make a vaccine from Ellie's tissue, despite only having a short time to examine her? Complex brain surgeries occur without death, so why not extract just a small sample, and try not to kill her? Since doctors can't be sure their vaccine will succeed, more so since they're working with extremely limited post-apocalyptic resources, wouldn't the more responsible and less hubristic course be to keep her alive for further study? And finally, why must she die within hours of arriving at the Firefly headquarters with almost no discussion? (For more on Marlene's choice to authorize the surgery and Joel's response, see Section ??? in this volume!)

The scenario in *The Last of Us* is so divorced from plausible reality that it's "like a spaceship," as Ellie says the first time that she's in an automobile. The situation mirrors objections that philosophy professors sometimes raise against utilitarianism, an ethical theory that considers actions good if they enhance collective well-being. Critics have presented fictional cases of slaves being happier, but the philosopher, Richard Hare (1919—2002), responds that these imagined scenarios aren't relevant to the actual world. After all, if a society can ensure the contentment of slaves, it can surely make people even happier by abolishing the institution.¹⁶

Non-Western philosophies, like those found in China, favor compromise over binary choices. Responsible doctors would start extracting a sample of the fungus from Ellie's brain and work with that, rather than destroy their only source for study and murder a child. This course of action would show some respect to individual rights and simultaneously maximize chances of collective well-being.

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Mind Infections

The Last of Us has one seemingly acceptable collective: the Jackson Community. However, Maria and Tommy disagree about whether their community is communist in structure. It's likely that Tommy's right because there's no state ownership or nationwide central government. The community, which has an American flag draped on its main street, is comprised of rugged individuals, riding horses in frontier landscapes and toting guns. Jackson is also depicted as largely self-sufficient, so, it's about as communist as *Little House on the Prairie* or *Davy Crockett*.

Though the Jackson Community isn't communist, it's a successful collective. Nonetheless it's outnumbered by at least four bad collectives: FEDRA, The Fireflies, the Kansas City Resistance, and David's cult. So, the primary depiction throughout *The Last of Us* is that collectives are usually bad.

The opening credits amplify the message. The sequence features eerie music and visuals of fungus taking over, growing into shapes that resemble city skylines, a decaying human head, and a map of the United States that stops at the Canadian border, hinting at the series' populist American-centric alignment. The credits end with silhouettes of Joel and Ellie surrounded by creeping fungi, all reminiscent of the 1950s communist paranoia since the disease pulls victims into a hive with no individuals.

Communist paranoia wasn't just about economic and political takeover of the American state and capitalist economy, but also a fear of ideas infecting American minds. Similarly, *The Last of Us* isn't a simple story of fungus-driven zombification; it's a tale that explores the mindlessness that arises from the contagion of ideas. The fungal-like spread of ideas parallels the contemporary evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins's meme theory, which suggests that cultural elements, like beliefs, transmit between brains like viruses, regardless of their truth or usefulness.¹⁷ Cult leaders

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like David equate blind loyalty to virtue, discouraging critical thinking. Dissenters face punishment in this world and probably the next, which promotes belief retention and spread as well as the surrendering of individual will to a higher authority.

To be fair, characters outside of collectives “lose” their minds sometimes. Joel has a flashback of a soldier shooting his daughter when a FEDRA guard points a gun at Ellie. This flashback leads him to uncontrollably beat and kill the man, even after he’s helpless. But given the situation, most of us probably find his actions understandable, even if we believe he goes too far. Later, when Joel assaults the Fireflies to save Ellie, the haunting music, shots of the dead, and needless killing of wounded are clearly intended to express moral ambiguity. However, we’re emotionally attached to Joel and Ellie, and barely acquainted with those getting slaughtered because of their idiotic scheme, so we’re unlikely to root for the Firefly collective. Usually it’s even more one-sided, as when Joel kills murderous members of the Kansas City Resistance. Most of the collective gets massacred because Kathleen, the leader of the resistance, fixates on killing Henry, while ignoring the zombie threat. In the resistance group, everyone falls into groupthink, obeying Kathleen’s stupidly reckless orders.

The representation of collectives as a fungal disease indicates their undesirability and reiterates their foolishness. Their ignorance is explicitly stated when Joel denies Ellie’s request for a fire on a cold night, and she wants to know whether it’s because the Infected will see the smoke. Joel retorts, “Fungus isn't that smart,” and intimates that he’s worried about people.

Minding Interconnections

Although Confucianism includes elements Thoreau would disapprove of, such as the use of rituals to establish social harmony and prescribed roles in hierarchies, it doesn’t imply the dissolution of individuals within collectives. Confucian philosophers even criticized governing through “coercive

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regulations”¹⁸ and regard death as better than unworthy actions.¹⁹ Thoreau agreed, stating “*cost what it may*,” a person shouldn’t “resign his conscience to the legislator.”²⁰ But harsh rules encourage just that. In the United States, however, Thoreau said that people “are commonly esteemed good citizens” for acting “as machines” with “no free exercise of the moral sense.”²¹

In *The Last of Us*, however, it’s primarily in collectives that people lose the free exercise of their moral sense. The Kansas City Resistance succumbs to a mob mentality, cheering as FEDRA prisoners are brutally executed. And neither Marlene, nor her soldiers, nor the medical team, question the wisdom of murdering the only immune person, who incidentally is a child. Bill at least weighs things and changes his mind to invite Frank in for a meal.

Despite the prevalent criticisms of collectives in *The Last of Us*, there are also criticisms of conventional libertarian arrangements. The fungal outbreak resulted from capitalist machinery supported by libertarians like Narveson, who argue that unrestricted food pricing will solve world hunger.²² In the HBO series, Joel speculates that the fungus mutated and got into ingredients like flour and sugar, which are widely found in industrially processed foods. Most people got sick, but the fact that he ran out of pancake mix, the neighbors made raisin cookies instead of chocolate chip cookies, and that Joel forgot the birthday cake, spared him and his daughter.

The link between the outbreak and free capitalist exchange reminds us that, despite *The Last of Us*’s general emphasis on individuals over collectives, it’s wise to acknowledge interconnectedness. The Chinese Buddhist luminary Fazang (643—712) claimed that “one is all” and “all is one.”²³ Using an architectural analogy, Fazang said that “the rafter is the building” and “the building is the rafter,”²⁴ suggesting the two define and make one another what they are, similar to how individual rights only makes sense in the context of shared community existence. Though Thoreau didn’t go as far as Fazang, he recognized and agreed that things are intertwined and that

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interconnectedness averts disasters, such as the one that occurs in the *Last of Us*. Thoreau's observation means appreciating that humans can't act without impacting the world. And that's the reason why they can't avoid affecting (and infecting) one another.

¹ Enactive Pragmatism and Ecological Psychology," *Frontiers in Psychology* 11 (2020), art. 2598.

² Matthew Crippen and Dag Lindemann, "Selective Permeability, Multiculturalism and Affordances in Education," *Philosophical Psychology* (2023, online first).

³ Matthew Crippen, "Africapitalism, Ubuntu and Sustainability," *Environmental Ethics* 43 (2021), 235-259; Matthew Crippen, "Chinese Thought and Transcendentalism: Ecology, Place and Conservative Radicalism," *Religions* 14 (2023), 570; Matthew Crippen, "Psychological Expanses of Dune: Indigenous Philosophy, Americana, and Existentialism," in Kevin Decker ed. *Dune and Philosophy* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell), 108-118; Dave Wang, *China and the Founding of the United States: The Influence of Traditional Chinese Civilization* (London: Lexington, 2021).

⁴ Merlin Sheldrake, *Entangled Life* (New York: Random House), Intr., Ch. 1, Ch. 2, Ch. 4.

⁵ Charles Mann, *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 278; Wang, *China and United States*.

⁶ Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason* (London: Freethought, 1880), 10.

⁷ Wang, *China and the Founding of the United States*, Ch. 1.

⁸ Thomas Jefferson, "A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge, 18 June 1779."

<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-02-02-0132-0004-0079>.

⁹ John Adams, "John Adams to Mercy Warren, 16 April 1776," in *Warren-Adams Letters* (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1925), 222.

¹⁰ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* [1854] (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 4.

¹¹ Jan Narveson, *Moral Matters*, second edition (Broadview Press, Peterborough, Canada, 1999), 143.

¹² John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1970), 152.

¹³ Desmond Tutu, *God Is Not a Christian and Other Provocations* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 21.

¹⁴ Anne Waters, "Introduction," in Anne Waters ed., *American Indian Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), xxvi.

¹⁵ Ted Jojola, “Notes on Identity, Time, Space, and Place,” in Anne Waters ed., *American Indian Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 92.

¹⁶ Richard Hare, “What is Wrong with Slavery,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 8 (1979), 103-121.

¹⁷ Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 206-212.

¹⁸ *Confucius Analects*, trans. Edward Slingerland (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2003), 2.3.

¹⁹ *The Mencius*, trans. Irene Bloom (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 6A10.

²⁰ Henry David Thoreau, “Resistance to Civil Government,” in Elizabeth Peabody ed., *Aesthetic Papers* (New York: G.P. Putman: 1849), 190-193.

²¹ Thoreau, “Resistance,” 191.

²² Narveson, *Moral Matters*, 154.

²³ Fazang, “Essay on the Golden Lion,” trans. Bryan Van Norden, in Justin Tiwald, and Bryan Van Norden eds., *Readings in Later Chinese Philosophy: Han to the 20th Century* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2014), 88.

²⁴ Fazang, “The Rafter Dialogue,” trans. David Elstein. In *Readings in Later Chinese Philosophy: Han to the 20th Century* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2014), 82-83.