

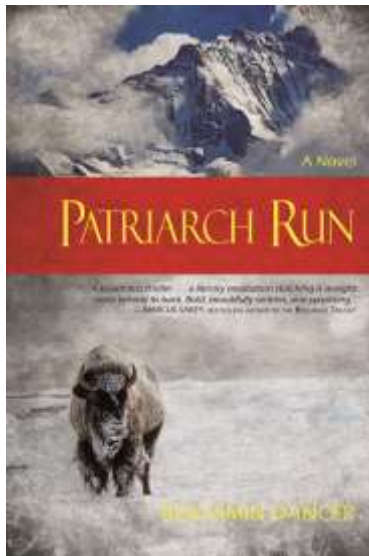


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Is Jack The Good Guy or the Bad Guy?

A thought experiment

Benjamin Dancer



Readers of my eco-thriller [Patriarch Run](#) tend to struggle with the character Jack. It's hard to know what to make of him. Is he the good guy or the bad guy? Intelligent people can disagree on the answer to that question.

I wrote the novel, as I am writing this post, as a bit of a thought experiment: a piece to provide some conversation about the strong feelings Jack evokes. That being said, beware: there are plenty of spoilers below.

Because Jack is motivated by the unintended consequences of continued population growth, let's start the conversation there.

Any population that is growing will eventually double. That is a mathematical fact. Even with a growth rate as low as the current growth rate of the human population, around 1%, it only takes 70 years to double, which is about one human lifetime. Moreover, a population that perpetually grows will eventually

become too large to be sustainable. I think we can all agree on that without deciding on a precise number for an ecological tipping point.

A supposition that might be more controversial, though it shouldn't be, is that the vast majority of the global concerns that vex you and me (concerns such as Climate Change, declining liberty, hunger, national security, the rapid extinction rate of other species, environmental degradation, mass human migration, economic challenges, etc.) are all unintended consequences of continued population growth. Notice, by the way, that the problems cited above span the political spectrum. That's because the unintended consequences of continued population growth are bipartisan in their scope.

Back to the story. Jack made a calculus in my eco-thriller regarding the fate of the human species. He examined what he knew of our innate biological and psychological drives and calculated that the probability of our species voluntarily reducing its own growth rate to zero (or less) was lower than the probability of zero growth being forced upon our species. In other words, he calculated that left to our own devices, we'd likely run our species off an ecological cliff.

If we do nothing and wait until nature puts the brakes on our population, according to Jack's way of thinking, those brakes will take the ugly form of an overpopulation-induced apocalypse, resulting in billions and billions of deaths.

Thus far Jack's logic works as follows: people aren't going to fix overpopulation; nature's fix will result in an unacceptable number of deaths; therefore, the moral thing to do is to choose the lesser of two evils and precipitate a super-genocide. In other words, according to Jack's morality, murdering about 7 billion people (including me and, unfortunately, you, along with all the people we dearly love) is a better alternative than allowing many more people to die, at some point in the future, when the human population would be much larger. That future population might be as massive as 10, 24 or 30 billion people, depending on what the actual limit of the human population might be before it triggers its own collapse. As an aside, the population was about 6.884 billion in 2010, the time of the narrative, and Jack probably assumed a few million of us would survive in the world he created.

For the sake of brevity, I won't say much here about Jack's chosen mechanism of destruction, except for that it is (unfortunately for you and me and everyone we love) a realistic threat. As a matter of fact, many prominent national security experts have endorsed the realism of *Patriarch Run's* depiction of that threat. So let's all be thankful that Jack is only a thought experiment. I wouldn't want him walking among us.

Apart from Jack's obsession with mass murder on a scale never seen before in human history (and a unique skill set that actually makes him capable of pulling it off), he's a pretty likable guy. So readers really struggle with the question: is Jack the good guy or the bad guy?

The moral calculus presented here might remind the reader of a classic ethical dilemma known as the trolley problem. Sarah Bakewell described the problem in the New York Times like this:

You are walking near a trolley-car track when you notice five people tied to it in a row. The next instant, you see a trolley hurtling toward them, out of control. A signal lever is within your reach; if you pull it, you can divert the runaway trolley down a side track, saving the five — but killing another person, who is tied to that spur.

Which is the correct choice? In surveys, most people, 90%, opt to pull the lever, choosing one death instead of five. In other words, 90% of us calculate the morality of the situation like Jack.

To make the question more interesting philosopher Judith Jarvis Thomson presented The Fat Man version:

As before, a trolley is hurtling down a track toward five people. You are on a bridge under which it will pass, and you can stop it by dropping a heavy weight in front of it. As it happens, there is a very fat man next to you—your only way to stop the trolley is to push him over the bridge and onto the track, killing him to save five. Should you proceed?

Although most people are willing to pull the lever in survey questions, very few can see themselves pushing the man. The number of lives at stake are the same in both scenarios, so why do people feel more comfortable pulling the lever than pushing the man?

Jack is clearly in the minority now. He would have pushed.

This thought experiment is a useful tool in examining our morality. Ethicists tend to boil the dilemma down to this: we can act on a rational and utilitarian calculus, intentionally killing one to save five; or we can respect the subrational instinct that makes us recoil at the thought of pushing a man to his death, choosing not to act, thus allowing the avoidable death of the five.

Patriarch Run can be viewed as a fleshed out version of the trolley problem. The story assumes a scenario in which the exponential growth of the human population threatens the extinction of

the species. One man, Jack Erikson, has an opportunity to stop the unfolding ecological crisis, but to do so he must sacrifice even his own family. Depending on how you choose to solve the trolley problem, Jack is either the villain or the protagonist of the narrative.

I'd be really curious to know how you answer, or perhaps even reframe, the question, as all this makes for interesting conversation.



Benjamin Dancer is the author of the literary thriller [*Patriarch Run*](#), the first book in a series that will include *Fidelity* and *The Story of the Boy*. He also writes about parenting, education, sustainability and national security. He is the Director of Public Relations for the Colorado EMP Task Force On National and Homeland Security, which is the Colorado branch of a Congressional Advisory Board. Benjamin also works as an Advisor at a Colorado high school where he has made a career out of mentoring young people as they come of age. His work with adolescents has informed his stories, which are typically themed around fatherhood and coming-of-age. You can learn more about Benjamin at BenjaminDancer.com.

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