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ARTICLE

# Incels and Warrior Masculinity

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**Abstract**

I provide an analysis of incel ideology which contributes to philosophical reflection on this distinctive form of online misogyny. The analysis complements extant feminist interpretations by illustrating some moral psychological limitations of popular objectification and entitlement frameworks. After emphasizing the central role of self-loathing in the incel worldview, I offer a partial explanation of the roots of this self-loathing by appealing to the underappreciated significance of masculine warrior ideals.

> These days, we hear men bitching that women's liberation is emasculating them. They yearn for a status quo ante, when their power was rooted in the oppression of women. They forget that the political advantages they enjoyed always came at a cost: women's bodies belonged to men only inasmuch as men's bodies belonged to the means of production in peacetime, and to the state in time of war. (Despentes 2020, 29)

## 1. Feminism and masculinity

The overarching goal of this paper is to contribute to a better understanding of masculine imaginaries, or systems of symbols, ideals, and narratives that mediate the construction of masculine personalities.[1] The more circumscribed goal is to offer an interpretation of the incel phenomenon.[2] In pursuit of these aims, I explore a provocative set of hypotheses about the centrality of warrior masculinity in contemporary social imaginaries. My investigation is guided by the conviction that notions like male privilege and entitlement are essential yet insufficient for progress toward healthier constructions of gendered selves. Such progress requires greater attention to the ways that dominant masculinities harm boys and men, in addition to people of other genders. This perspective is relatively commonplace in some areas of public discourse and in masculinity studies. Philosophers can develop it in productive ways.[3]

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## 2. Incels

I need to give a characterization of my subject matter. According to the prevailing understanding, an incel is a person, usually a man, often a young man, who is angry and resentful on account of their involuntary sexual inexperience. This definition is not illuminating. A better approach is to define an incel as a person who endorses what I am going to call *incel ideology* (or endorses it to a sufficient degree). The hard problem is characterizing the ideology. My view is that understanding this disturbing social phenomenon requires philosophically sensitive interpretation.

A brief note about method may be useful. I draw on a diverse set of evidence about and from incels, including academic research in various fields, investigative journalism, YouTube video essays, and, importantly, subreddits and other online materials taken from the spaces where incel "communities" interact. I cannot claim that my treatment is comprehensive. I must emphasize the astounding volume of ideological content produced by incels themselves, and the mind-bending rules of the theoretical games they are playing, both of which make intellectually satisfying synthesis challenging.[4] That said, I will describe some of the most arresting and puzzling features of incel thinking, features which any satisfying account of it must help us understand.

The approach differs from that taken by several philosophers who have written on this topic. For obvious reasons, these commentators tend to focus on individuals like Elliot Rodger who have claimed the incel identity, perpetrated violent crimes that are motivated by this identity, and produced the most personally inflected and exhibitionistic expressions of an incel worldview (Manne 2020; Srinivasan 2021; Melo Lopes 2023). Rodger's manifesto "My twisted world" is accessible online, extraordinarily alarming, and teeming with apparently significant detail. Nonetheless, this manifesto—and, it seems to me, any single-authored incel document—is bound to be idiosyncratic. "My twisted world" is also filled with the incoherence and self-deception one might expect from the final missive of a mentally ill sociopath. We cannot assume this is a blueprint for incel thinking generally. For one thing, as the insightful YouTube essayist Natalie Wynn (2018) notes, "Most incels are not violent killers. They're just men who've formed an identity around not getting laid."[5] Additionally, incel ideology has developed considerably since 2014, when Rodger committed his brutal crimes and took his own life. This ideological development coincides with a conspicuous rise in the number of self-identified incels and a corresponding escalation in the dangers posed by their worldview. Many scholars now consider incels a "nascent political movement" (Zimmerman 2022) or "potential terrorist group" (O'Donnell and Shor 2022) in need of serious study. My own interest is in trying to isolate the common threads in incel thinking, so I'll be drawing on a wide range of materials. It should go without saying that these and other approaches can be complementary.

My opinionated summary has the following desideratum. I want to explain how incels should be differentiated from others in the "manosphere" (Basu 2020), or the loose network of sexist, overwhelmingly male online communities that also includes men's rights activists (MRAs), men going their own way (MGTOW), and pickup artists (PUAs), among others. To do this, I emphasize the unusual character of their global narratives, and particularly their transition from the "red pill" to the "black pill," suggesting that this transition reveals core features of a distinctive and highly precarious psychological situation. Though aspects of this story will be familiar to many readers, the details provide a systematization of incel ideology that builds on existing insights about the nature of fanaticism in the manosphere.[6]

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**Figure 1.** Internet meme dramatizing incel attitudes about "hypergamy."
*Note*: Image in three panels of stock-seeming photographs. In the first panel, titled 'Women,' a woman in business attire sits behind a desk. She is speaking to another woman, the back of whose head is visible, with her hands folded on the desk in a powerful pose. Text at the bottom of image reads "I want equality and equal pay!" In the second panel, titled 'Also Women,' we see the same image, with the text now reading "I want a man who is better looking, taller and stronger than me so that I feel small and protected. He also has to earn more money than me." In the third panel, titled 'Men,' a man in a business shirt contemplates a rope fashioned into a noose that hangs at the height of his head. He holds his chin in a thoughtful manner.

The red pill is a family of ideas and conspiracy theories that animate incels as well as other online misogynists. The concept is derived from the 1999 film *The Matrix*. Taking the red pill represents an awakening: in *The Matrix*, to the reality of a machine-generated dreamworld; in manosphere theory, to the reality that men are not privileged and that women increasingly seek to dominate them.[7] In all its incarnations, red pill theorizsing is an attempt to expose putatively underappreciated forms of male victimization. The notorious film *The Red Pill*, for example, claims to give viewers revolutionary insights into male vulnerability to depression, suicide, and violence.

A central claim of many red pill narratives is that women are naturally "hypergamous." Rollo Tomassi's influential 2013 book *The rational male* invokes this term over 150 times. The core claim is that women seek relationships—with men, of course—who are situated above them in social hierarchies (Ging 2017). Generally, and curiously, red pill proponents tend to focus on two and only two axes of hierarchy: social

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status (chiefly wealth) and conventional sexual attractiveness. Incels narrow red pill theorizing even further, primarily emphasizing men's (supposed) sexual victimization at the hands of hypergamous women. They focus, rather myopically, on what I'll call the "lookism version" of the hypergamy thesis (Halpin 2022). (See Figure 1 for an illustration.)

According to incels, hypergamy is accelerated by feminism, which gives women more power to be choosy. This claim is hard to interpret. Female hypergamy is supposed to be a "natural proclivity"; feminism is accordingly deemed a "logical outcome" of this natural phenomenon (Incels Wiki, 2024c). Yet feminism is also blamed for accelerating hypergamy. Perhaps the idea is this: hypergamy and social change lead to feminism, feminism gives women more power to self-determine in the sexual realm, and this accelerates hypergamy. In any event, incels believe the contemporary dynamics of hypergamy undermine social justice in the sexual realm (Sharkey 2022, 45).[8] Sexual attractiveness can be measured on a numerical scale. In a just world, sexual and romantic relationships would be governed by a "looksmatch" principle. For instance, a 5/10 woman would date a 5/10 man. In the actual world, the looksmatch principle is flagrantly violated, systematically harming less conventionally attractive men. Instead of looksmatch, what incels call the 80/20 rule obtains. In one common formulation (Tomassi 2016), the rule states that only the most attractive 20% of men are desired by the most attractive 80% of women.[9] These men are the lucky, inimitably virile alpha males known as "Chads," who monopolize the attentions of both "Stacys" (hot, unintelligent, vain, hyperfeminine) and "Beckys" (nerdy, lacking in femininity, feminist adjacent) (Jennings 2018).

We are already in frustrating and distressing territory. The lookism version of the hypergamy thesis appears hopelessly vague or trivially true. After all, most sexually active people are disposed to pursue sex with people they find attractive. In other words, they are hypergamous by default, in that they are disposed to regard at least some others as more attractive than they are themselves, and to pursue sex with those highly attractive others in contexts where this is an option.[10] Setting that aside, more specific claims about female hypergamy—e.g., the 80/20 rule or any similar principle—seem falsified by easily available data and by common sense (Power 2022, 66–67). But suppose, very implausibly, that some such claim was true. Why would anyone think this constitutes a violation of justice for which some people should be blamed and resented? If women and only women are *naturally* hypergamous, we should expect systematic violations of the looksmatch principle; if these violations are part of the natural order of things, then it is hard to see how justice could require preventing them. Of course, the looksmatch ideal could in principle be enforced by a powerful authoritarian state. Most incels do not appear to connect these dots, and we should not assume they favor such a radically dystopian political theory, though some do advance authoritarian solutions under the heading of "sexual Marxism" (see Zimmerman 2022 for discussion).[11]

Instead of developing the preceding ideas about sexual justice, which would be as exhausting as it is unnecessary, I will briefly explore an obvious and direct empirical challenge to the 80/20 rule, because incels are aware of it and their response is instructive. As a matter of fact, most heterosexual men do have sexual-romantic relationships with women. According to a comprehensive survey about sex and dating conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2020, the demographic group with the highest proportion of single people (NB: *not* celibate people) in the US is men aged 18–29. The figure is 51%. This drops to 27% in the 30–49 age cohort. Interestingly, almost half of US adults (47%) said in 2020 that dating was harder for most people than it was ten years

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**Figure 2.** Internet meme illustrating the incel focus on conventional physical attractiveness and the "genetic determination thesis."
*Note*: Image in two panels side by side. Both panels show young men in profile from the neck up. The two young men resemble one another, but the man in the panel on the right is more conventionally handsome. For instance, the man on the right has a more muscular neck, a squarer jaw, a more prominent forehead, and deep-set eyes. A caption above the images reads "The difference between Chad and non-Chad (incel) is literally a few millimeters of bone."

before. And there has been a significant increase in the proportion of partner-less people over the last three decades, arguably providing evidence for this popular suspicion. Likewise, there has been a significant increase in sexual inactivity for many groups, but most markedly for young men, in the last two decades. Nonetheless, even interpretations of the rise in male sexlessness that are charitable to aspects of the incel worldview demonstrate the absurdity of the 80/20 rule and kindred ideas: "[T]he top 20% of the most sexually active never-married young men have about 50–60% of the sex. *It's about the same for women*, and these shares are basically stable over time" (Stone 2018, my emphasis).

How could anyone believe these data are compatible with the 80/20 rule? Red-pillers have an explanation: the fact that more than 20% of heterosexual men have sex (and even lasting sexual-romantic relationships) is no evidence against the rule, because these men are not actually sexually desired. Hypergamous women pursue a sophisticated mating strategy known colloquially as "Alpha Fucks Beta Bucks." They have sex with as many "gorgeous fuckboys" as they can in their youth. They then settle down with wealthy and industrious "cuckboys" as they age. Women use these beta normies for financial support while continuing to sleep with Chads whenever they can. Eventually, women leave their cuckolded partners in the dust—or stick around because they've been "pumped and dumped" by Chads and need money, housing, drugs, or fawning affirmation. In other words, seemingly damning evidence in fact confirms the spirit of the 80/20 rule, if we open our eyes to the ugly truths that feminist narratives about sex are designed to obscure.

So far, the difference between incel ideology and the broader red pill ideology of the manosphere could be described as one of emphasis. The anxious incel focus on a hierarchy of sexual attractiveness epitomizes the manosphere's theory of male subjugation, if obsessively narrowing its scope. The black pill represents a further awakening and expresses a proprietary extension of these ideas. To take the black pill is to endorse the claim that one's location in the sexual hierarchy, or one's "sexual market value" (SMV), is *wholly genetically determined*. As the famous incel meme (Figure 2)

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puts it: "the difference between Chad and non-Chad (incel) is literally a few millimetres of bone."

In other words, Chads are alpha males in virtue of immutable laws of attraction that draw women to men with certain (physical) features. They are destined for a life of satisfying promiscuity.[12] Others are beta males in virtue of the same immutable laws. They are destined for sexless marriages with unfaithful wives. And then there are the incels themselves, who are doomed to emasculation and virginity—forever. These three outcomes exhaust the possibilities for heterosexual men.

Unfortunately, I am not overstating the strength of the genetic determination thesis. As Zimmerman (2022, 6) notes, the thesis is so important to them that incels devote stupefying levels of attention to what they call the "scientific blackpill," that is, to developing "pseudo-scientific criteria for determining genetics and testosterone levels by factors such as height, facial features, skull shape, shoulder width, and penis size." When combined with the view that getting laid and finding romantic love are essential to happiness, which incels also accept uncritically, the thesis leads to the conclusion that happiness is permanently out of reach. This conclusion explains some of the most confronting features of the incel lexicon. For instance, the slogan "hope, cope, or rope," the acronym LDAR (lay down and rot), the tag "suifuel" (suicide fuel), and many other manifestations of acute anxiety, depression, and propensity to self-harm appear constantly in online forums.[13] These features of incel ideology have long been documented (Donnelly et al. 2001) yet remain understudied.

We've seen how the genetic determination thesis secures the transition from red pill manosphere theory to black pill hopelessness. And we've introduced the first of two representative incel responses to black pill consciousness: anxious isolation and depression related to a negative self-conception, which with alarming frequency eventuates in suicidal ideation. I discuss these negative self-directed attitudes in more detail in the next section. But to conclude this section I want to say something about the second response, i.e., the mutation of hopelessness into a war on women.

Incels desire conventionally attractive women so powerfully that failing to be desired in return by them is regarded as an insurmountable, life-ending tragedy. We might expect their resentment to target the beautiful women who have paid them no attention. It does, but in addition it clearly targets women as a class (Figure 3).[14] See, for instance, the common acronym AWALT (all women are like that), often glossed in something like this way: "all girls tend to want to seek after sexually arousing men to father their children, and betabuxxes to provide financial security and emotional comfort" (Incels Wiki, 2024a). Likewise, in Rodger's manifesto, "goddesses" become "evil, slutty bitches," and their nature is taken to be an unchanging feature of *woman*. Women are naturally voracious, beastly, depraved sexual beings who viciously emasculate non-dominant men. They are a "plague" whose "wickedness must be contained" if justice is to be done (Rodger 2014, e.g., 136).

Some wonder how incels can sustain this combination of desire for women and resentment of them (Melo Lopes 2023). I want to pursue a slightly different interpretive question. What explains why incels are so powerfully attracted to both black pill hopelessness *and* to blaming women for their misfortune? As is often observed, many people who face painful sexual rejection avoid seething with bitter resentment towards half the human population (Tolentino 2018). What's needed is an explanation of the special psychological contours of incel dissatisfaction, negative emotion, and, at the limit, violent aggression. This explanation is more elusive than is often believed.

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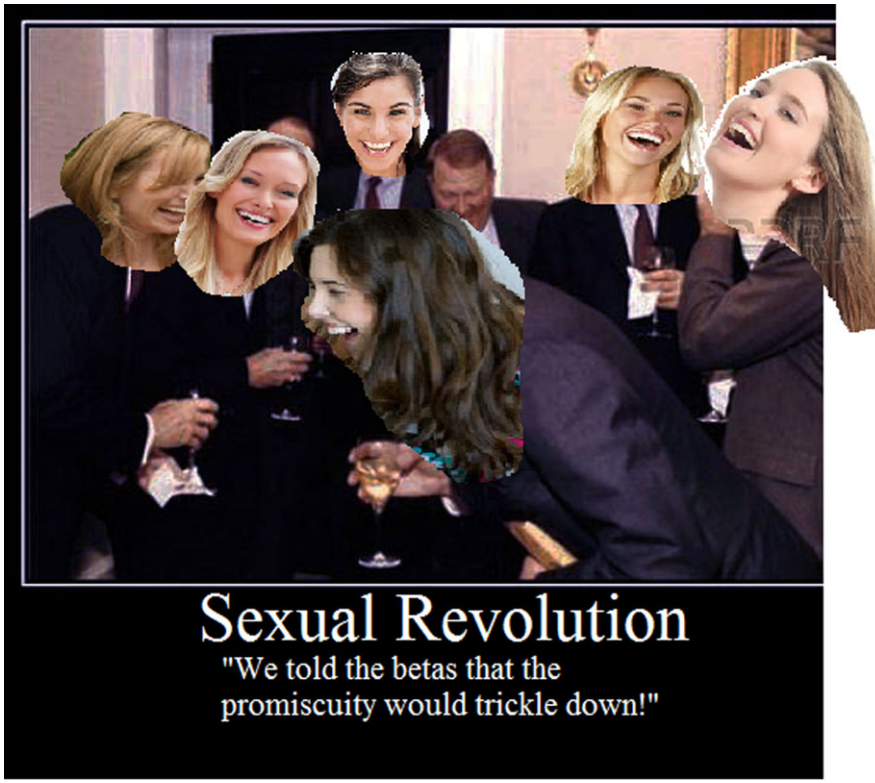



**Figure 3.** Internet meme exhibiting incel resentment towards women.
*Note*: A stock photo of men in suits holding alcoholic beverages has been doctored so that images of six young women's faces are superimposed on top of the men's heads. The women are all laughing. Below this image, a caption reads: "Sexual Revolution." Then, in quotation marks (as if being spoken collectively by the group of laughing women): "We told the betas that the promiscuity would trickle down!" The text suggests the women are taking great pleasure in contemptuous mockery of "betas."

## 3. Objectification and entitlement

Some of the most compelling analyses of incels have come from feminist theorists. I will discuss two related approaches. I call them the *objectification* and *entitlement* explanations. Doing so will help motivate my own proposal.

The notion of objectification is vexed.[15] Nonetheless, in this context the idea is straightforward. Tolentino (2018) claims that incels are animated by a conception of women as "decorative sexual objects," and that they desire women as if they were "inconveniently sentient bodies." There's no doubt that incels routinely dehumanize women: regarding them as deficient in characteristically human capacities for rational choice or complex emotion; valuing them as commodities, noteworthy mostly for the ways in which they are sexually distributed. Incels are correspondingly disillusioned by the assertion of women's autonomy, particularly their social and sexual power. Incel ideology is an expression of these frustrations. For one of the least extreme examples, consider the ubiquitous practice of referring to women as "femoids" or "foids" (Chang

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2020), which emphasizes their framing as subhuman others. More intemperate examples abound.[16]

Still, the objectification explanation is incomplete. As Kate Manne notes, incels do not desire mute bodies or the bare physical act of intercourse. Notably, they are uninterested in paying for sexual services; only a "pathetic loser" does that (Rodger 2014, 120).[17] Incels want to feel attractive and admired. They desire a relatively traditional kind of romantic attention (Manne 2017, 150; Manne 2020, 25; Melo Lopes 2023; Maxwell et al. 2020, 1864).[18]

To be clear, one can desire romantic attention while endorsing the servility or objectified status of the person(s) desired.[19] So I am not claiming Manne's observation shows that incels do not objectify. They do. What the observations show is that more needs to be said. And here is the main problem: the objectification explanation does not distinguish incels from other objectifiers. In patriarchal cultures women are systematically objectified. As MacKinnon (1989b, 340) famously put it: "All women live in sexual objectification like fish live in water." Even if incels objectify women more than others do, this fact does not seem to illuminate the most interesting particularities of their condition.[20] As Martha Nussbaum (2021, 19) observes, while an account of objectification can help us understand the *what* of sexual harm, it does not explain the *why*, i.e., "the underlying formations of emotion and desire" that lead to it.

While the objectification of women cannot alone suffice as an explanation, another form of objectification may be more distinctive. In underappreciated ways incels *objectify themselves*. Tolentino (2018) suggests in passing that the foundation of incel despair is attachment to a problematic ideal of self-regard: a man's worth is determined by the sexual attention he receives from women. In what follows, I explore this attachment to self-objectification in greater detail, trying to unearth the sources of these pathological self-directed attitudes—and suggesting they may help reveal some poorly understood features of prevailing masculinities.

A second story emphasizes male sexual entitlement. Heterosexual male privilege characteristically involves a sense of entitlement to sexual pleasure from women. The incel is the "sexless man … convinced he is owed sex … [and] enraged by the women who deprive him of it" (Srinivasan 2021, 73).[21] Incel ideology, and the negative emotions that give rise to it, are reactions to the disappointment of these hierarchical expectations. Adoring subordination is the expectation, resentment the response to perceived disobedience. Incel reactions are thus examples of "backlash" (Faludi 1991), "aggrieved entitlement" (Kimmel 2013; Manne 2020), and sexist enforcement or "misogyny" (Manne 2017).

Male sexual entitlement is a profoundly important phenomenon. There's no doubt that incel ideology and negative emotion are tied to frustrated sexual expectations, and that many of these expectations are usefully captured by recent accounts of entitlement. A widespread and often unreflective presumption that heterosexual men should and will be desired by women undergirds the sense of victimization saturating the manosphere.

Like the appeal to objectification, however, the entitlement explanation is incomplete.[22] Again, the explanation struggles to distinguish incels from other sexist men. Incels are not alone in being sexually entitled. Nor are they alone in being angry about frustrated expectations. As Manne (2020, 18–19) says: "Incels are but a vivid symptom of a much broader and deeper cultural phenomenon … [their] sense of entitlement to … affection and admiration is a trait they often share with the far greater proportion of men who commit acts of domestic, dating, and intimate partner violence." This insightful point can be expressed more provocatively. For reasons I will now

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outline, it is likely that the sexual entitlement of the average incel is more ambivalent, and less explanatorily powerful, than the entitlement of the average sexually active heterosexual man.

Consider two potential applications of an entitlement hypothesis. In the first, we use it to explain the behavior of a young man who sexually assaults an unconscious young woman at a party. We say: if this young man did not regard sexual pleasure as something owed him by the universe (i.e., by women), then he could not have intentionally pursued sexual gratification with this clearly unresponsive person (Manne 2020, 37–39).[23] In the second, we use it to explain the suicide of a young man poisoned by incel ideology. We say: if this young man did not regard sexual pleasure as something owed him by the universe (i.e., by women), then he could not have taken his own life because of sexual disappointment.

Though neither explanation is perfect, the former is much better than the latter.[24] It is true that incel hopelessness is often related to frustrated expectations and a sense of victimization, but we cannot explain these facts merely by invoking the claim that sex is something incels take themselves to deserve. After all, one of the most immediately arresting features of the thinking of incels is what I will refer to for convenience as *self-loathing*. By self-loathing, I mean a complex of negative thoughts and emotions directed at the self: fatalistic judgments of ugliness and worthlessness, emotions of anxiety and discomfort and rage and sadness and shame and disgust. When incel self-loathing is made salient the entitlement explanation looks underdeveloped. To feel *deserving* of sexual-romantic attention requires a healthy baseline of self-regard that incels appear to characteristically lack.[25]

We've seen that incel self-loathing is powerful enough to prompt the invention of a baroque and conspiratorial ideology, and that a key feature of this ideology is its naturalization project. The evident point of this project is to vindicate feelings of worthlessness, hopelessness, and emasculation. Incels are inferior men who *cannot* be found attractive by women. Even in a world where women's hypergamous tendencies were somehow neutralized, incels would presumably occupy the very bottom of the only pecking order that matters, because their sexual inferiority is not a matter of social contingencies.

To better understand incels we must understand the nature of this self-loathing and how it complicates entitlement-based explanations. Incels are hopeless and attached to this hopelessness, so attached that they are moths to the flame of mind-bendingly implausible explanations of their inalterable inferiority. Some aspects of incel theorizing are more tightly connected to entitlement than others. For instance, the idea that hypergamy unsettles sexual justice obviously presupposes that men are entitled to attention from their looksmatches and are victimized when they do not get it. My point in the last paragraphs has not been that we should reject the entitlement hypothesis but that it needs to be supplemented. As a scholar of political violence (Cottee 2021) has recently put it: "Any explanatory account of incel-inspired terrorism that does not foreground these two core and closely related emotions—shame and revenge—is likely to be partial or seriously incomplete."

To introduce my own proposal, I want to consider a simple question. Why does the frustration of perceived *sexual* entitlements matter so uniquely to incels? Many people think they are entitled to a safe community, or opportunities for deep friendship, or adequate health care, or a decent job, or sustainable environmental policies, and do not feel that their entire existence is a worthless sham when they do not get one or more of these things.[26] Indeed, many underemployed incels presumably believe their entitlement

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to decent employment has been flagrantly violated—and, it must be noted, constructions of masculinity are powerfully linked to the role of breadwinner (Gonalons-Pons and Gangl 2021). Yet these men do not appear to compulsively direct their attention and negative emotion in this direction. They may well vote for Donald Trump, but they do not form online communities with the purpose of exposing the oppressive economic order. They have developed no critique of capitalism remotely comparable in scope to their critique of feminism. They do not glorify violence directed at the affluent, business owners, or politicians. Put another way: though incels sometimes claim that their gripes concern the alienation of modern man (Maxwell et al. 2020), it is only sexual-romantic alienation that seems to in fact preoccupy them. So, there is something important to be explained: the link between the extent of this distress and its sexual character.[27]

Understanding these features of incel psychology requires saying something more about how incels see their own inadequacy. Theorizing about objectification and entitlement is crucial, but insofar as it concerns how incels see women it cannot accomplish this task. We need, in addition, a theory of a negative self-image: an explanation of a pathologically anxious, vulnerable, and pessimistic focus on perceived sexual undesirability. Further, if incels really do "crystallize gender dynamics present in their wider social environment" (Melo Lopes 2023, 135), as many have maintained, we should attempt to say in more detail what this pathological lack of self-regard tells us about masculine self-conceptions more broadly.[28] My suspicion is that masculine self-loathing is a common feature of contemporary gender dynamics that is too often overlooked. It is an especially resilient symptom of self-objectification and the underlying system of ideals that leads to it. Excavating this system of ideals is an essential project to which philosophers can contribute.[29]

## 4. Warrior masculinity

I will now explore a provocative set of hypotheses about masculine moral psychology. First, core masculine ideals in many cultures are connected to the role and character of the warrior. Second, the imprint of warrior masculinity has special significance in the domain of heterosexual sexuality. In this section, I'll argue that these two hypotheses have substantial explanatory promise. In the next section, I'll explore a third hypothesis, which is that attachment to warrior masculinity explains much of the (sexual) ideology of incels. I take these hypotheses to be interesting in part because they push beyond more familiar ideas about dominant masculine imaginaries, for instance concerning the ideal of breadwinner/provider and its connection to contemporary men's status anxiety (Nussbaum 2021, 32).

Versions of the first hypothesis have been defended in different ways by scholars in military history, political science, gender studies, philosophy, and other fields. I am going to follow some of these scholars by speaking of "militaristic cultures" and a "warrior ideal." This terminology simplifies. Any modern national culture contains many subcultures. Race, class, religion, ability, and other identity-relevant characteristics profoundly mediate the development of individual personalities. The significance of even the most universal ideals will be different for each differently positioned individual. Acknowledging these facts is compatible with offering general philosophical analyses in good faith. Some readers will still have reasonable worries about the absence of race or class-based analysis, for example, in my discussion. I'll say something brief about incels and race at the end of the section to try and assuage these concerns, but I want to

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emphasize that there are obvious limitations to my treatment here, and that this essay does not aspire to present a full picture of "the" (or any) masculine imaginary.

Because of my own background and interests, I will focus primarily on the work of recent philosophers who have written about masculinity. I begin with a paper by Graham Parsons (2023) about how gendered assumptions have surreptitiously influenced the development of just war theory as well as ordinary thinking about the moral status of soldiers.

Traditional just war theory treats soldiers as having diminished moral standing. First, they are legitimately targeted in war, regardless of its cause. Second, they are subordinate to political authorities and can be used and sacrificed on command. Parsons argues that the justifications for this treatment of soldiers provided by canonical just war theorists are surprisingly weak. Nonetheless, this presupposition about the diminished moral standing of soldiers is manifest in domestic and international law and often considered platitudinous. What, he asks, has made this view about soldiers seem so defensible for many centuries?

Parsons claims that a significant part of the answer is that the problematic aspects of just war theory are grounded in a presumption about a natural, gendered division of social labor. Specifically, the just war tradition relies on the assumption "that it is *good for men* to sacrifice themselves in violent combat to protect their families and communities" (2023, 280, my emphasis). Similarly, the tradition constructs the moral standing of the civilian by appealing to the status and nature of women (Kinsella 2011).

It may seem a stretch to attribute this presupposition about masculine goodness to the entire just war tradition. But that appearance may dissipate when we consider the power and scope of arguments linking social constructions of manhood with military achievement (e.g., Elshtain 1995; Goldstein 2001; Braudy 2005; Sherman 2005). According to a rich and decades-old interdisciplinary literature, "a reliable way to affirm one's manhood across cultures is to be adept in the arts of war and to demonstrate the physical and characterological capacity to engage in battle without fear" (Parsons 2023, 281).

Importantly, this gendered division of social labor is "natural" because it is supposedly in virtue of their biological nature that men are governed by the warrior ideal. Parsons quotes General George Patton on this theme: "a real man will never let his fear of death overpower his honor, his sense of duty to his country, and his innate manhood" (cited in Hirshon 2002, 474). The natural connection between masculinity and war is a myth, but one we make real by social conditioning. We encourage toughness and roughness in boys from a very young age, transmitting "authorized forms of masculinity suited to the war system" (Goldstein 2001, 288). And we discipline boys and men with misogynistic and homophobic abuse when they exhibit sensitivity inconsistent with a warrior's character. In military culture, but not only there, we encounter the idea that a boy who cries is womanly, i.e., less than a man (Sherman 2005, 136–42).

Parsons traces these ideas about natural masculinity back through the history of theorizing about the conduct of war, identifying how figures such as Hobbes, Grotius, Pufendorf, and even Walzer endorse them. This extraordinary discussion provides some compelling evidence for the hypothesis that masculine ideals are often connected to the role and character of the warrior. I will not rehearse that evidence here. Instead, I'll explore the explanatory potential of the warrior masculinity hypothesis, and I'll motivate the more controversial second hypothesis, that warrior ideals have special significance in the domain of heterosexual sexuality. I do this by offering an interpretation of work by

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Tom Digby (2014), the philosopher who has discussed these matters most explicitly. I emphasize again that related ideas can be found in the work of many theorists from diverse disciplinary backgrounds (e.g., Lerner 1986; Whitworth 2004; Duncanson 2019).[30]

The dialectic here is complicated, so I want to outline the argument that my interpretation of Digby is meant to serve. Ultimately, I'm looking for a cultural explanation of incel ideology, one that can supplement the objectification and entitlement explanations and give us insight into the roots of incel self-loathing. The explanation must have something to do with masculine ideals in the domain of (hetero) sexuality, and the ways that incels perceive themselves to be falling short. I'm claiming that in this connection it is worth reflecting on warrior ideals and their potential implications for masculine subjectivity. Digby's account of militaristic cultural norms helps us to articulate some of these potential implications. Digby does not discuss incels specifically, so the claims in this section concern what his views permit us to say about masculine psychology generally, at least in cultures where the warrior ideal has psychological currency. In the next section, I extend some of these observations to provide an analysis of incels.

Before giving my interpretation one methodological note is in order. I understand Digby's account of warrior masculinity as an instance of inference to the best explanation: the best explanation for various masculine phenomena is the warrior ideal. In fact, this is only one half of Digby's explanation, since he also wants to explain the *origins* of this ideal. It is important to make clear that questions about what widespread acceptance of an ideal can explain are distinct from questions about why it arose and why it persists. I'm interested in what we can explain if we endorse the stated hypotheses about the present significance of the warrior role. From my perspective, we can treat origin and persistence claims as useful stories, perhaps fictional, that aid us in conceptualizing the relevant ideal. Put slightly differently, my interpretive aim is to summarize Digby's account in a way that allows even those sceptical about many of its features to appreciate some intriguing explanatory advantages.[31]

Digby begins with a question about what he calls *heterosexual adversariality*. Given the thoroughgoing heteronormativity of cultures like ours, it can seem odd that heterosexual sexuality is so often conceived in an adversarial way, e.g., as a "battle of the sexes." Why is heterosexual love so tense and difficult, at least in some cultures, such that belligerent metaphors seem apt enough to become canonical? This is Digby's motivating "paradox" (2014, 1–4). For our purposes, it does not matter whether "heterosexual adversariality" is an apt description, or whether this aspect of the setup is overstated. What matters is the next stage of the presentation.

According to Digby, societies that are, or have been, *war reliant*—societies that tend to rely on violence to resolve problems—are ones where heterosexual adversariality is especially common. Similarly, to the extent that a society is not war reliant, it seems to have less heterosexual adversariality. In other words, Digby thinks there is empirical-historical support for the hypotheses we are exploring in this section: that core masculine ideals in many cultures are connected to the role and character of the warrior, and that the imprint of warrior masculinity has special significance in the domain of heterosexual sexuality.

I think we should be agnostic about these empirical generalizations connecting war reliant societies with higher degrees of heterosexual adversariality. Digby provides some interesting anthropological support for them (Digby 2014, 7–12), but they are difficult to evaluate absent more systematic investigation (Held 2016). Moreover, we do not need a

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comparative measure of a society's historical or present war reliance to explore hypotheses about what warrior masculine ideals *might* explain. Indeed, it is a familiar contention, in feminist philosophy and elsewhere, that the cultural residue of an ideal can outlast the conditions that gave rise to it (e.g., Beauvoir 2011 on longstanding myths of femininity). Accordingly, I will introduce Digby's key claims about cultural militarism and the warrior role without assuming these claims are supported by anthropological evidence. Again, my intention is to show that the hypotheses allow us to articulate novel and illuminating explanations. If so, these explanations constitute independent evidence for the hypotheses.

The two basic features of cultural militarism are the faith in force and the presumption of adversariality. The former is really a faith in masculine force, and encompasses the beliefs that force is efficacious, that it is often the best way to solve problems, and that it is to be glorified. (A nice illustration is Pericles's funeral oration (Thucydides 1972, 76), which presents manly valor, and particularly death in war, as the greatest human honor: "To me it seems that the consummation which has overtaken these men shows us the meaning of manliness in its first revelation and in its final proof.") When this faith in force is operative in a culture, the warrior role becomes one main masculine ideal.[32] The related presumption of adversariality is an assumption that force will often be required, sometimes tending toward "paranoid presumption of enmity with other societies" (Digby 2014, 9). Though this applies in the first instance to external enemies, and to force in the sense of war-making, adversariality ultimately infuses the internal culture of militaristic societies. Internally, adversarial presumptions express slightly modified ideas about the importance of force, for example, about the importance of masculine assertiveness, aggression, and dominance.

Digby thinks, for example, that internal adversariality is expressed in, and exacerbated by, adherence to the gender binary. The binary divides humans into two and only two gender kinds ("opposite sexes") governed by incompatible norms, and it polices attempts to make the boundaries between these groups more porous. In other words, the gender binary encodes and enforces *oppositional ideals* for men and women. Making a boy into a man involves, to some significant degree, making him into a proto-warrior who is combat-ready both physically and emotionally. At the same time, this amounts to making him not-woman, as learning to be tough in the requisite ways is learning how to avoid femininity. One simple illustration, according to Digby: the definitive mode of provoking and humiliating boys and men is by calling them girls, ladies, wusses, pussies, little bitches, and the like. To be feminized is the worst possible fate by warrior masculinity's lights, even though receiving feminine companionship and love is also a fundamental part of the masculine ideal (2014, 13, 136).[33]

Part of Digby's ambition is to offer an origin and persistence narrative for these oppositional ideals. Men are originally tasked with being warriors, he thinks, because they are more expendable than women: "If a lot of men get killed, the population can still be replenished fairly efficiently, but not so if a lot of women get killed" (14).[34] Similarly, women are tasked with childbearing and nurturing, essential for making it possible that a society continues to flourish and is constantly ready for war. I will not dwell on this origin and persistence story, but it is worth being explicit about it in the interest of faithful representation. I will note that, even if the proposal is plausible as an explanation of the origins of these ideals, it seems inadequate as an explanation of their persistence. Nonetheless, supplementary explanations may be available. For instance, the warrior ideal might reproduce itself through sporting culture in ways that often evade full conscious awareness. Compare the observations of Virginie Despentes (2020, 41)

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concerning Camille Paglia's sexualized valorization of the "warlike rage" and "wild masculine energy" on display in American football.

Finally, Digby's most explanatorily significant claim concerns the psychology of the warrior. The key trait of an effective warrior, he contends, is the ability to *manage the capacity to care about suffering*. The warrior must cultivate the skill of selectively caring about the suffering of others—as well as his own. He must be capable of grievously harming others without hesitation or remorse, and of accepting great personal suffering without fear or self-pity. In fact, these statements may be too weak. It would often better serve the warrior's assigned ends if he *enjoyed* causing suffering. Inculcation into this masculine role thus involves the habituated restraint of empathy, fear, and self-care. It also involves the cultivation of aggression and the desire to overpower, subdue, dominate. The conditioning of women, by contrast, amplifies their capacities for empathy and care (Digby 2014, 22).[35]

Having presented Digby's core claims about oppositional gender roles and warrior psychology, I can now introduce the kinds of social explanations these claims might render more transparent. I suggest that these observations constitute evidence for the two hypotheses we are considering: core masculine ideals in many cultures are connected to the role and character of the warrior, and the imprint of warrior masculinity has special significance in the domain of heterosexual sexuality. I stress that the formulations in the next four paragraphs are my own.

First, consider widely held views about the gendered distribution of emotional intelligence, emotional expressiveness, and emotional and hermeneutic labor.[36] Whatever one's view about the value of stoicism, it is plausible that connections between masculinity and *restricted emotionality* are longstanding and significantly, though not universally, intercultural.[37] What's the source of this pattern of emotional dispositions, and why is it so robust? One proposal: restricted emotionality in men is explicable when their culture valorizes warrior masculine ideals, since the main psychological task of warriors is to inhibit some of their own tendencies to feel and care (Sherman 2005).[38]

Second, consider common ideas about the most striking exception (the only exception?) to men's restricted emotionality, namely anger or angry aggressiveness. If men are, as is routinely supposed, relatively constrained in their capacity to feel and express anxiety, joy, sadness, affection, and many other emotions, why are they so much *more* prone than women to expressing anger, or, better, to angry aggressiveness and violence?[39] Stupefying gender asymmetries in violent crime are observed in most contemporary cultures (see United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Global Study on Homicide 2019). One candidate explanation of these asymmetries is that pervasive masculine ideals encode the positive value of *turning negative emotions into aggressiveness and violence*. And that would be a predictable consequence of militaristic acculturation. Sherman (2005, 65) notes that Seneca expresses the conventional ancient view when he claims, in *On anger*, that anger "whets the mind for the deeds of war." In other words, if masculine training is in part training for war, we should expect many men to exhibit an otherwise puzzling combination of restricted emotionality and heightened anger-aggressiveness (Duncanson 2019, 470). As Shay (1994, 81) observes, the American military's advice to grieving soldiers in Vietnam who had lost their comrades was the deeply sad dictum "Don't get sad. Get even!"[40]

Now turn to common observations about male aggressiveness and attachment to domination in the sexual realm. Why are many men attracted to pornography that depicts *demeaning and sometimes abusive treatment of women*, where the connection

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between such degradation and actual sexual pleasure appears at least opaque? Outsized misogyny in porn is so frequently found sexually stimulating that we risk minimizing the strangeness of this well-known fact. Yet we need to explain how the humiliation of women is easily eroticized, such that porn depicting it is not just present in many contemporary social environments but extraordinarily popular and arguably hegemonic.[41] The second hypothesis being explored in this section is that the ideal of the warrior leaves an especially significant imprint in the sexual-romantic realm: attachment to the warrior role disposes men to seek opportunities for aggression and dominance, and they are especially disposed to seek them in their sexual relations with "the weaker sex." I do not claim to completely understand these mechanisms, but it is worth remarking that recent research suggests men especially concerned with social dominance tend to assert that dominance over women by sexually objectifying them (Bareket and Shnabel 2020).

Relatedly, we must ask about the substantially cross-temporal and cross-cultural problem of male sexual violence against women, noting various connections between militaristic settings and increased sexual violence (Wilson 2018). One example: the use of rape as a weapon of war.[42] In reflecting on what he calls "gender terrorism," Digby argues that male sexual violence is caused by sexism combined with additional elements of warrior masculinity, namely emotional detachment and the faith in force (140). Stated more neutrally: sexist attitudes do not suffice to explain sexual violence. Many sexual abusers are not merely sexists, but people with the capacity to suppress caring about victim suffering (Contos 2023), and, sometimes, the capacity and willingness to use force to get what they want. And what they want is not usually sexual pleasure simpliciter but sexually mediated superiority or even revenge. These men can take a certain *pride or satisfaction in sexual violence*. Such psychological capacities are both awful and bewildering; as Haslanger (2021) asserts, the incidence of rape is not just horrifying but also "a puzzle." In short, there is a distinctively masculine interest in non-consensual sexual dominance for its own sake, an interest that is overwhelmingly though not exclusively directed at women. Our theories of masculine identity formation must explain this. That many men take pride in sexual "conquest" is more explicable if they are, consciously or not, trying to express themselves as warriors.

These last few paragraphs have, I hope, begun to illustrate the explanatory potential of the two hypotheses. Those sceptical about these explanations must provide alternative ones, since the remarkably gendered phenomena cited cry out for explanation.[43] That said, I have not claimed that my brief arguments amount to anything like definitive evidence for the hypotheses. I have not suggested that all cultural imaginaries include the same forms or degrees of militaristic ideology. I have not said that the warrior ideal is the only masculine ideal, even in the most militaristic societies. I would never deny that the psychological significance of the warrior ideal for an individual will be mediated by many other features of their character and environment.[44] In the interest of making my perspective and its limitations as explicit as possible, I'll conclude this section with a tentative thought about what some readers will take to be the biggest lacuna in my treatment, which is the absence of racial analysis from my discussion of warrior masculinity and, ultimately, incel ideology.

Links between the manosphere and right-wing politics are often foregrounded (ADL Center on Extremism 2018), and online misogyny appears to play "an important role in the far-right project of legitimising racist ethno-nationalism" (Roose et al. 2022, 29). It can be surprising, then, to find evidence suggesting close to 50% of incels are non-white (Halpin 2021; Sharkey 2022), although there is debate about these numbers (Hoffman

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et al. 2020). Exact figures aside, it is clear that "a considerable number of incels identify as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color"; indeed, many attribute their incel status to the "low SMV" of non-whiteness (Gheorghe 2024). Moreover, commentators have recently started to appreciate the growing influence of racially diverse creators of misogynistic content, and of the Black manosphere in particular (Onuoha 2022; Dashiell 2024). To mention just one example, the *Fresh and Fit* podcast started in late 2020 and by early 2024 had over 1.5 million subscribers. So, notwithstanding evident associations between incel ideology, right-wing movements, and white supremacy, the precise nature of this relationship "remains unclear" (Cottee 2021). One can believe that racism infuses incel thinking in explicit and surreptitious ways while also believing that incel ideology taps into male preoccupations that cut across race, nationality, class, and even political affiliation.[45]

I want to be up front about my own uncertainty here. More work on the intersectional nature of online radicalization is needed. All I've claimed is that positing warrior ideals at the core of a cultural imaginary has intriguing and underappreciated explanatory power. These ideals may help explain puzzling and consequential features of masculine feeling and behavior, especially in the domain of heterosexual sexuality.

## 5. Incels and warriors

In this final section I explore the third hypothesis, that attachment to warrior masculinity explains much of the (sexual) ideology of incels. I'll warm the reader up with some sociological speculation.

In the last decades, women in liberal democracies have been gaining social power. Assuming a perceived zero-sum scheme of oppositional relations between the sexes, this power threatens men with progressive reduction of the "patriarchal dividend" (Connell 2005). Held (2016) summarizes a Digby-inspired corollary: "When men are unable to uphold their sense of masculinity through the supports of being the protector and the provider ... [they] rely even more on an enthusiasm for militaristic expressions of strength to satisfy their search for support of their identity." However, there is a "growing gap between the military and civilian worlds" (Sherman 2005, 20), and the vast majority of men are now completely unconnected to the militaristic apparatus of modern states (Feaver and Kohn 2001).[46] More importantly, various traditionally masculine expressions of power are increasingly restrained by law and culture (though these mechanisms are still woefully inadequate given persistent rates of sexual harassment, domestic violence, and so on). These phenomena calcify ego-anxiety and add urgency to men's search for opportunities to feel strong and dominant (compare Reeves 2022 on the cultural causes of male "deaths of despair").

Contexts such as sport, business, and politics may provide such opportunities for some men. But sexuality is in principle accessible in a way that elite sport, managerial privileges, and political power are not. Moreover, the oppositional ideals at the core of the heteronormative gender system position women as men's natural antagonists and sexuality itself as a confrontation. With narratives of masculinity in crisis becoming more influential, we can expect to see more men detaching from professional and political ambition and focusing instead on sexual power as a primary source of identity formation and self-regard.[47]

Now consider an incel's visualization of his failure as a man and the ideals underpinning this sense of failure. They are ideals of powerful achievement *exclusively* in the sexual arena. The achievement is hierarchical, adversarial, and often violent. Sexual

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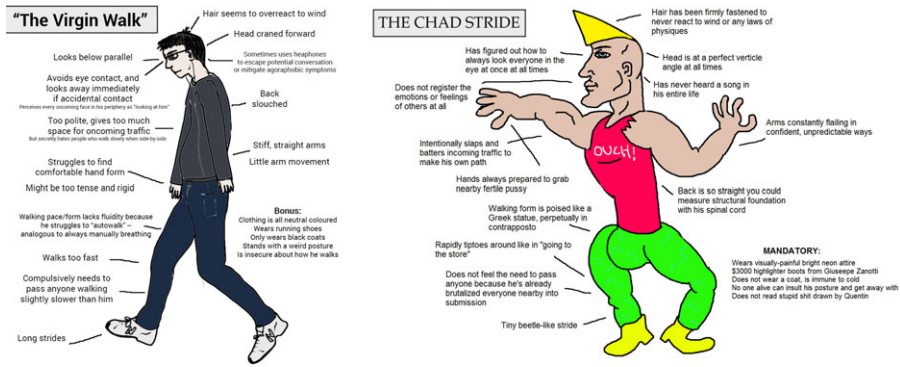



**Figure 4.** Internet meme depicting the Chad as an emotionless dominator.
*Note*: Two cartoonish illustrated figures are depicted side by side. On the left is a young man wearing jeans, a dark sweater, and sneakers. He is thin, wears glasses, and looks downward. A caption reads "The Virgin Walk." A variety of associated descriptions accompany the figure, e.g. "Head craned forward," "Back slouched," "Little arm movement," "Walks too fast," and "Struggles to find comfortable hand form." On the right is an especially cartoonish and absurd looking man wearing a red tank top, lime green pants, and yellow boots. He has a large head, prominent jaw, and big muscles. A caption reads "The Chad Stride." A variety of associated descriptions accompany the figure, e.g. "Head is at a perfect verticle angle at all times," "Walking form is poised like a Greek statue, perpetually in contrapposto," "Does not register the emotions or feelings of others at all," and "Hands always prepared to grab nearby fertile pussy."

achievement is the result of triumphing in a competition for the scarce resource of hypergamous women. Winning this competition is the one and only form of virility vindication that matters. The winners (the Chads) are those who have sex regularly and promiscuously. Crucially, winning also involves enacting sexual power by dominating the "opposite sex": the Chads don't just have sex, they take it. These are the dual elements of hierarchical competition animating incel ideology. Sexuality is a battle between men, and between the sexes, *from which all and only "real men" emerge as victorious conquerors*. Incels are self-defined as this battle's inevitably powerless losers, doubly emasculated by virile men and disdainful, social-climbing women.

By way of illustration, let's explore the shape of the fixation on Chads. A Chad's potency cannot be reduced to his impressive number of emotionless encounters with hot, submissive women. It involves a dominant mode of being that is mythologized as the explanation of his sexual success (i.e., his manliness). Consider, for example, the well-known incel meme contrasting "the virgin walk" with "the Chad stride" (Figure 4).

The Chad's stride is relaxed and confident. He "[d]oes not feel the need to pass anyone because he's already brutalized everyone nearby into submission." Nonetheless, he does have his "hands always prepared to grab nearby fertile pussy." Similarly, consider the frequently employed iterations of the concept "mog" (from AMOG: alpha male of the group), used to refer both to acts of domination ("mogging") and to the feeling (on the part of the "moggee") of being dominated and humiliated by another man's virility, as in "that Chad dickmogged me with his mooseknuckle." In many other ways, incels exalt the masculinity of Chads by emphasizing their supposed assertiveness, physical superiority, and propensity for manipulating women. Even more disturbingly, Chads are said to be characterized by the "dark tetrad" personality traits of narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and sadism. And women are said to be particularly attracted to these traits (Incels Wiki 2024b).

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I've argued that the warrior ideal may help explain persistent heterosexual male concern with sexual dominance. My suspicion is that this concern is routinely remarked upon but not often explained.[48] I've also claimed that in the incel worldview this concern becomes an obsession. It is essential to highlight the continuity here: incels exhibit fanatical adherence to already prevalent narratives that vindicate their anxious lack of self-regard. Contemporary figurations of male sexuality *ubiquitously* eroticize aggressiveness, competitiveness, dominance, and violence (Churcher and Gatens 2019) in a way consistent with largely unconscious loyalty to warrior masculinity. For example, consider the highly gendered metaphors customarily employed to represent "the sexual act," nicely summarized by Richardson-Self (2021, 46): "In this way, Man is *a sexual agent*; he exercises his agency when he scores, hits it, nails, smashes, bangs, ploughs, drills, rams, destroys, screws or pounds her—after all, as they say, any hole is a goal. Woman, then, is not a sexual agent, but a *sexual object*. She is the thing that is ploughed, nailed, drilled, hit and smashed." Incels have not created these metaphors. But they perpetuate them, and develop additional images, ideas, and narratives that in a particularly grotesque fashion eroticize man's dominance—that is, a real man's dominance—and woman's subordination.

Of special interest to us is inceldom's most distinctive contribution to the culture of the manosphere, namely black pill hopelessness. I conclude the paper by exploring how obedience to warrior ideals may lead to a dangerous form of self-objectification, or at least a dangerous deficit of self-love, one that is especially difficult for incels to address. This difficulty helps us conceptualize the black pill's extraordinary psychological sway.

Whatever their views about women, incels do not regard themselves as mindless automata. We need a wider notion of objectification for these and other purposes. Here is an imperfect analogy. Imagine the psychological orientation of an exploitative boss. The boss does not deny their worker's capacity for subjective experience, or for rational thought, as both are required for the relevant work. Yet the boss still treats the worker like a rational tool because he *cares* only about the worker's productivity. Just as a person can be objectified in a commercial context by someone who cares only about their economic use, so too can a person be objectified in a sexual context by someone who cares only about their sexual use.[49] And these forms of objectification may be self-directed.

It seems to me that incels objectify themselves in a similar way, though their self-instrumentalization concerns not economic production or sexual use but sexual achievement. While incels conceive of male worth in terms of sexual success, they do not appear to value sex as a form of sensual pleasure, let alone interpersonal connection (after all, there are other available means to those ends which their ideology totally ignores). They understand its value in terms of the dominant masculinity it expresses, which is constituted by the behaviors and attitudes of others: other men, their direct competitors, whose admiration validates; but most fundamentally women, whose desire and attention and pleasured subservience constitute the relevant achievement. In this sense, incels care about themselves as if they were rational tools. Their value as persons depends on what they produce in the specific arena of sex. If a man does not attract sexual attention from women, his life is worthless.

Readers may be reminded of related claims about the structure of feminine self-valuation under patriarchy. Here is Bartky on feminine narcissism (1990, 38): "Knowing that she is to be subjected to the cold appraisal of the male connoisseur and that her life prospects may depend on how she is seen, a woman learns to appraise herself first." Compare Bauer (2011, 123) on self-objectification in contemporary hook-up culture:

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some young women feel "obliged to turn themselves into toys for boys." But notice the differences. For Bartky, self-objectification occurs when a woman "[takes] toward her own person the attitude of the man" (36). If there is any sense in which an incel can be said to take towards his own person the attitude of a woman, it is a hyperbolically misogynistic woman of the manosphere's invention. Moreover, incel self-objectification is particularly severe. It is customary to internalize oppressive beauty norms without identifying the value of one's life with the value of being beautiful. The characteristic incel transition, from red pill to hopeless self-loathing, depends on the alienating reduction of the value of a man's life to the value of getting laid.

I think it is useful to present these ideas via the notion of self-objectification.[50] But I can offer a more neutral formulation. Incels *cannot love themselves* until they rewrite this story about the ground of self-regard. Like every form of love, self-love involves caring for the beloved and valuing their flourishing for its own sake. This is incompatible with valuing the beloved only, or primarily, for their (sexual) achievements. To connect these notions of objectification and self-love explicitly, we might say that incels regard and treat themselves as mere means in ways that are incompatible with self-love.[51]

The diagnosis helps explain the magnetic attraction of incel fatalism. Once a man becomes attached to this narrow and disempowering vision of manliness, he is intensely susceptible to alleged proofs of his worthlessness. It also helps explain the common trajectory of depressive and hateful radicalization. A person who takes himself to be worthless is volatile and especially amenable to ideologies of resentment. The final element of my proposal concerns the obstinate character of this condition.

When we fall short of an ego-ideal, one appropriate response is the emotion of shame.[52] Shame is a potentially destructive state. When left to fester it can lead to serious psychological disorder. Angel (2021, 67) puts it nicely: "the failure to reach this impossible horizon [of heterosexual masculinity] engenders the very feelings of insecurity and shame from which male violence ensues." But to reflect on one's shame is to occupy a vulnerable, exposed state. And vulnerability and emotional expression are anathema to warrior masculinity: a central requirement of the warrior is that he be adept at "managing" his own suffering, where managing often means ignoring, minimizing, repressing. What's more, overcoming deep shame requires more than emotionally exposed self-reflection. It requires extended processes of emotional work, usually in the context of interpersonal revelation and dialogue. These processes are likewise deemed unmanly in social environments where warrior masculinity has currency.

So, the very same masculine ideals that make shame inevitable also push toward the repression of shame, lest emasculation be compounded. But the repression of shame is poisonous and fuels destructive impulses—in many circumstances, presumably, impulses to reassert obedience to the damaging ideals. It is hard to see how incels could break this cycle from within the confines of attachment to warrior masculinity. But it is not hard to see how their peculiar cocktail of self-loathing and resentment might emerge from such a fragile and pathological state.[53]

You might think incels *have* succeeded in breaking free from these confines. They express shame, sometimes with arresting exhibitionism (though the anonymity of the internet complicates judgments about shamelessness and disclosure). And in reacting against a masculine imaginary that genuinely victimizes them, incels are in one sense further along than many other men, who do not even recognize that they too are harmed by dominant masculine ideals. However, this recognition is confused and inarticulate at best. Insofar as a man has come to identify as an incel, his shame has prompted the opposite of the needed reforms. He has chosen ideological backsliding rather than

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critical revision. For example, he has come to idolize Chads, perhaps even forming desires to become a Chad via previously unconsidered means, e.g., "looksmaxxing" (Rosdahl 2024) and sometimes surgical intervention (Hines 2019, Gheorghe 2024). And though he may parade his shame on Reddit, he does not care about himself enough to investigate its roots in good faith. His spiraling hopelessness expresses obedience to the warrior ideal more than repudiation of it. This obedience is paradigmatically masculine in its refusal to genuinely engage with suffering.[54]

Even more fundamentally, the incel-constitutive misogynistic resentment demonstrates that any expressions of non-dominant masculinity are only skin deep. Incels "engage" with their shame in large measure by cultivating hatred for blameless women. At the limit, violent retribution is represented as the answer to self-loathing: according to the most fanatical incels, it is the only way to realize the alpha masculinity that otherwise eludes them.[55] In these cases, the pathological incapacity to engage with suffering is especially vivid.

The characteristic reactions we have analyzed—self-loathing and misogynistic resentment—may eventuate in an act of total surrender. Digby (2014, 70) claims that "[a]s perhaps the ultimate indicator of fear, anxiety, and weakness, suicide is anything but masculine" (though "masculinity can make it a lot more likely to happen"). Here I'm inclined to disagree. It is paradigmatically masculine to repress one's own suffering until it is unmanageable, and to then settle on violence as the only viable solution. So, from my perspective, this surrender is a predictable and tragic victory for the warrior ideal.

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## Notes

1 See Gatens (2019, 185) for more on social imaginaries: "the symbols, metaphors, and narratives that characterize a given people at a particular place and time [that] shape the fundamental social realities through which they become who they are"—and for the observation that "the capacity to imagine things otherwise is an admirable feat of resistance that dwells at the core of every movement for liberation"; and Richardson-Self (2021, chapter 1) for a detailed account of social imaginaries frameworks.

2 The term "incel" (involuntary celibate) was coined in 1997 by Alana, a Canadian lesbian woman who blogged about celibacy and sexuality. Alana received awards from the LGBT community for this site but shut it down in 2003, having become distressed by the increasingly negative tone of discussions (Taylor and Jackson 2018). Nowadays, self-identified incels are predominantly heterosexual men and boys whose online discourse is characterized by gross misogyny and sometimes valorization of violence. Incels have committed several mass homicides, including Elliot Rodger's killing of six people in Isla Vista, California, and Alek Minassian's killing of ten people in Toronto. Tres Genco faces life in prison for his plot to murder 3,000 sorority women in Ohio (Heinrich 2022). See Srinivasan (2021, 111–13) for discussion of other cases that ought to be described as incel attacks.

3 We owe an important exploration of these themes to bell hooks. See hooks (2004, e.g., 4): "Feminist writing did not tell us about the deep inner misery of men. It did not tell us the terrible terror that gnaws at the soul when one cannot love."

4 Though I cannot recommend it, readers interested in one illustrative compendium might see the Scientific Blackpill (2024) page on Incels Wiki, which purports to convey "the scientific findings without judgment"

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while also containing "un-sourced speculation or writing from a more non-neutral perspective" (https://incels.wiki/w/Scientific_Blackpill).

5 Wynn's (2018) video essay on incels is outstanding and has influenced the treatment in this section.

6 See Alfano and Podosky (2023) for a recent discussion of incels that draws on Katsafanas's (2019) account of fanaticism.

7 For a well-known introduction to the red pill and the manosphere see Marche (2016).

8 Incels blame feminism but are also preoccupied with the idea that dating apps accelerate hypergamy (Preston et al. 2021). These new technologies *have* profoundly altered sexual relations, and perhaps disadvantage less conventionally attractive people. Heterosexual women do appear to receive more attention on apps like Tinder and Bumble than heterosexual men, though incels ignore the fact that much of this attention is unwanted, intrusive, and misogynistic (Abramova et al. 2016). Such observations do little to support the hypergamy thesis incels endorse.

9 Supposedly related to the Pareto principle, a generalization from Pareto's 1971 observation that 20% of Italy's population owned 80% of its land, i.e., the claim that, in many domains, roughly 80% of outcomes are explained by roughly 20% of causes. See Hypergamy (https://incels.wiki/w/Hypergamy#80.2F20_Rule) for an illustration of the alleged application to sex: "An internal OkCupid study from 2009 revealed that women irrationally evaluate 80% of men, brave enough to show their mug on a public website, *as below medium* (below 5/10)."

10 I assume many people's judgments of attractiveness track conventional standards of attractiveness.

11 Rodger's manifesto involves a very different proposal for an authoritarian incel utopia (2014, 136): "In an ideal world, sexuality would not exist. It must be outlawed. In a world without sex, humanity will be pure and civilized . . . to completely abolish sex, women themselves would have to be abolished." A few women will be spared, says Rodger; they will be artificially inseminated to ensure a sexless future.

12 Notwithstanding much talk about missing out on romantic love in addition to sex, incels routinely conceive of Chad superiority in terms of a high volume of casual sexual encounters with a high number of female partners. In this respect, incel thinking resembles the thinking of pickup artists. But a major difference has just been presented: pickup artists necessarily reject the strong genetic determination thesis, assuming that some aspects of alpha masculinity can be cultivated. Many men agree and pay good money for lessons in the art of seduction (O'Neill 2018).

13 As Wynn (2018) observes, this is a paradigm example of catastrophizing, or drawing disastrous conclusions from everyday setbacks in ways that reflect the subject's underlying psychological vulnerability. Incels sometimes cast their darkest expressions as attempts at supportive humor. These interpretations are mostly unserious. The incidence of suicidal ideation among incels is well established (Daly and Laskovtsov 2021). See Power (2022, 27) on the internal "brokenness" that leads people to incel communities.

14 They also resent Chads, but the resentment is milder. It seems better described as jealous idolization coupled with holier-than-thou disdain. The latter is grounded in the sense that Chads are blissfully oblivious to the pain of non-Chad reality, and that incels are, by contrast, epistemically privileged (and superior to non-incel betas) on account of their awakening. See Squirrel (2018) for the claim that "incels have an odd relationship with chads, simultaneously loathing and worshipping them." See Laurie et al (2021, 81) for the claim that incels might be described as complicit with dominant masculinity.

15 For an overview see Papadaki (2019). See Jütten (2016) for a contrast between instrumentalization accounts (inspired by Nussbaum 1995) and imposition accounts (inspired by MacKinnon 1989b). The latter, which Jütten defends, understands objectification in terms of the imposition of social meanings that define one as to be sexually used. The former understands objectification in terms of actual use.

16 For one that exemplifies fear and anger directed at women's sexual freedom, see Roastie (https://incels.wiki/w/Roastie).

17 Though incels who turn to violence may direct their ire at sex workers. In the Toronto machete attack, a 17-year-old male stabbed two women working at an erotic massage parlor, killing one of them. (Canada's Youth Criminal Justice Act forbids revealing the perpetrator's name.) This is the only known incel attack to have targeted sex workers. It is also the first time Canadian authorities have charged someone with terrorism because of misogynistic ideology.

18 The much discussed "Imagine how a woman feels" subreddit illustrates this point nicely.

19 Consider LeMoncheck's (1985) example of the unhappy wife who submits to her husband's advances while feeling like a mere tool for his satisfaction. The husband intuitively objectifies his wife while desiring her sexual-romantic attention.

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20 Manne (2017, 150 and 2020, 26) also claims that the objectification explanation fits oddly with the distinctively second-personal character of incel complaints. Rodger addresses women directly, blaming them for the *injustice* of his not being desired, attempting to justify his act of "retribution." The charge of wrongdoing assumes that the charged are human beings and not mindless objects. There is much to say about this issue. For one thing, Rodger's moralism is probably incoherent. He is inclined to naturalize his inferiority *and* blame others for it; these are prima facie incompatible stances. More generally, if this is supposed to be a strike against the objectification explanation, then Manne is relying on a controversial notion of objectification that requires the objectifier to treat his object as mindless. Perhaps I am misinterpreting the relevant passages. Later I discuss a more capacious conception of objectification that's compatible with regarding the objectified as a fully rational agent.

21 Srinivasan (2021) recognizes limitations of the entitlement narrative in her later essay "Coda: The politics of desire."

22 Melo Lopes (2023) gives additional arguments for this conclusion.

23 I've formulated this explanation in a way that highlights potential connections between the notions of objectification and entitlement. Compare Nussbaum (2021, 18): "Because of this background sense of entitlement and this background instrumentalization, it is all too easy to deny full autonomy (ignoring non-consent) and subjectivity ('no means yes')."

24 Here's a more precise statement. Perhaps entitlement suffices to explain the assault. If so, this explanation is superior because entitlement does not suffice to explain the suicide. But perhaps entitlement does not suffice to explain the assault (as I'm inclined to believe). Still, entitlement comes closer to explaining the assault than to explaining the suicide; it is a more central part of the explanation.

25 Churcher and Gatens (2019, 155) explicitly link these notions of self-regard and sexual entitlement when they claim that "an overblown sexual self-regard and sense of entitlement among men" constitutes part of the cultural scaffolding for male sexual violence.

26 Some do turn from frustrated entitlement in the political sphere to hopelessness, resentment, and violence. I note that a focus on genetic determinism also characterizes racist online fanaticism, which is related in complex ways to manosphere misogyny (Bogetic 2022).

27 The excellent YouTube essayist Münecat (2022) observes that women are an "easy target" for men's inarticulate rage about contemporary capitalism. True, but the ease of this extraordinary transition needs to be explained.

28 Roose et al. (2022, 26): "The fact that different extremist groups share a common commitment to patriarchal masculinities and a misogynist worldview, and that such misogyny, far from being extreme, is often mainstream within the societies in which they operate, is occluded by the portrayal of violent extremist masculinities as abnormal, dysfunctional, or toxic." See also Nussbaum (2021, 16).

29 I remind readers that the average incel is not a violent terrorist, but a confused, depressed, impressionable young man (Jaki et al. 2019) who sees himself as unattractive and worthless and doomed to unhappiness—and who has turned to the wrong parts of the internet for guidance. Whether or not we sympathize with his plight, we must investigate the underlying causes of proliferating incel ideology if we hope to understand contemporary masculinity and gender relations.

30 For a recent example, see the interdisciplinary treatment of masculinity and violent extremism in Roose et al. (2022), and especially the discussion of how "[m]ale warrior motifs proliferate in both Islamist and far-right messaging" (35).

31 Digby might reject my claim that his account should be understood as an inference to the best-explanation style argument. He thinks philosophers fetishize argumentation in a way that contributes to a problematically adversarial philosophical culture. He claims that, for this reason, his book is primarily descriptive and explanatory rather than argumentative; it is an example, he says, of "postmilitaristic philosophy" (2014, xi). I do not accept these judgments about argumentation in philosophy and hope to show that Digby's core suggestions can be helpfully represented in argumentative form.

32 Digby (2014, 53–54) admits that in most societies there are "multiple cultural ideals of manhood," but claims that in militaristic societies "the various dimensions of manliness tend to be deeply and pervasively informed" by the warrior role.

33 Gatens (1996, 37): "Every woman is normatively defined, in our culture, as the opposite *and* complement of man."

34 Power (2022, 51) reflects on the fact that men are still over ten times more likely than women to be killed at work, a fact that the manosphere interprets as evidence of female supremacy.

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35 This does not imply that the conditioning of women amplifies their capacities for self-care. On the contrary, the feminine role is supposed to involve caring for children and husband to the point of self-sacrifice (22). Nonetheless, self-sacrifice need not involve ceasing to care about one's own suffering. This is one of the most distinctive features of the warrior role as Digby describes it.

36 For a related discussion see Manne (2017, chapter 4) on women as "human givers." For the distinction between emotional and hermeneutic labor see Anderson (2023).

37 Taiwo (2020) argues that stoicism (understood as "emotional compression") is a masculine-coded form of emotional labor that can be pro-social.

38 I'm not claiming that all ideals of the warrior valorize restricted emotionality. The argument only requires the weaker claim that most such ideals valorize at least some important forms of it. See Shay (1994) for an outstanding investigation of competing warrior ideals (e.g., 46): "Achilles' ridicule of his friend's tears is contrary to the values of the Homeric warrior, even though it seems natural to *us* that a soldier should sneer at tears."

39 River and Flood (2021) explore the emotional lives of 18 Australian men who attempted suicide. They find that, during childhood, these men learned that expressing emotions like sadness decreased masculine standing, while expressing anger, including through acts of violence, could enhance masculine standing.

40 I'm trying to respect current scientific research about putative gender asymmetries in anger, which suggests that women experience anger as much as men do, but that there are important asymmetries in anger's expression. An obvious concern is that women's anger might be underrepresented: anger in women is delegitimized, so its expression is constrained (Srinivasan 2018). The explanations pursued here might contribute to our understanding of *why* women's anger is delegitimized in the first place. Of course, some will think such phenomena can be explained biologically. But the best science of sex differences acknowledges the interaction of biological and cultural determinants. See Denson et al. (2018) for an example in current research on women's anger.

41 Kimmel (2008, 175): "The sexual fantasies of many young men become more revenge fantasies than erotic ones."

42 See Rich (1973) on rape in Vietnam and in war more generally (e.g., 110): "The equation of manhood—potency—with the objectification of another's person and the domination of another's body, is the venereal disease that lives alike in the crimes of Vietnam and the lies of sexual liberation."

43 MacKinnon (1989a) famously argues that heterosexuality itself is a system that eroticizes male dominance and female submission. Even assuming this system is a "social construct of male power" (128), we can still ask why men continue to adopt and enforce its ideals. Of course, MacKinnon thinks part of the explanation is that men benefit from social dominance. But while material power is obviously beneficial to its wielder, the emotional and sexual phenomena just presented are not obviously beneficial to men. On the contrary, they often harm men grievously; and many men see nothing desirable about alexithymia or rape.

44 For instance, behavior presented as virile for white men in the United States or Australia is often reframed as recklessness or indecency for black American or Aboriginal Australian men (Curry 2017; Kean 2019; Laurie et al. 2021).

45 Roose et al. (2022, 142): "An emerging body of research reveals that extremist groups at opposite ends of the political and religious spectrum adopt remarkably similar conceptions of 'what it is to be a man.' They idealise men as warriors, protectors, and breadwinners." See also Alfano et al. (forthcoming) for empirical work on racial preoccupations in the Anglophone manosphere.

46 According to the PEW Research Center, 18% of US adults were veterans in 1980. The figure for 2018 was 7%. There are corresponding decreases in active-duty personnel (3.5 million in 1968, 1.4 million in 2021). The draft ended in 1973.

47 Digby says little about how warrior masculinity affects non-heterosexual men. I believe masculine counternarratives are at least somewhat more accessible for sexual orientation minorities. Queer men face stigmatizing feminization from those attached to dominant masculinities, which may prompt healthy reimagining of masculine ideals. I cannot explore these issues adequately here. I stress that the incel phenomenon is a decidedly heterosexual one.

48 See again MacKinnon (e.g., 1989b, 324) on the question "Why is hierarchy sexy?"

49 This wider notion of objectification describes a category of attitudinal moral wrong—a wrong about *caring*—that often leads to wrongful treatment. It is plausibly within the purview of what Kant was attempting to describe with his Formula of Humanity, which prohibits treating humanity in yourself and others merely as a means. See Parfit (2011, 212–32) for discussion of Kant's principle and the ambiguities of

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"regarding as a mere means" vs. "treating as a mere means." See Anderson (2017, 39) for a defence of the view that "[m]ost workers in the United States are governed by communist dictatorships in their work lives," and for some shocking examples of what I am suggesting deserves to be called workplace objectification.

**50** Melo Lopes (2023) also traces the incel problem to what she calls self-alienation. Her Beauvoirian account of this phenomenon is related to my own: "What he wants is not a woman, a relationship, or a sexual encounter. What he wants *from* women is a way of being acclaimed and adored, while also escaping the perils of being judged by others. That is something no real person can provide. Only Woman, as a paradoxical myth, can give him this hope" (148). One way to conceive of the difference between these explanations: where Melo Lopes emphasizes a mythic creation of Woman, I emphasize a mythic creation of Man.

**51** For some related ideas about self-love see Velleman (2008, 204): "Genuine self-love is elusive because it requires a vivid awareness of one's personhood, consisting in one's rational autonomy. One can rarely avoid being vividly present to oneself as the conscious subject of feelings and behaviors, but one can easily be blinded to one's own autonomy or to the moral valence of that capacity."

**52** It is appropriate or fitting in that shame is an attitude prompted by failing to live up to one's ideals. The ideals are inappropriate, so in a different sense the shame is as well. I commit to no controversial theory of shame. For example, my claim is compatible both with views that require an audience for shame and with those that do not. See Bero (2020) for discussion.

**53** Warrior masculinity is not an agent. Most men are at least partially responsible for their plight. However, apart from the previous sentence in this footnote, I am making no claims about responsibility.

**54** Zimmerman (2022, 2) claims that incels endorse a counternarrative to hegemonic masculinity that centres their status as sexual subalterns. But it is unclear how oppositional this narrative ends up being. As Zimmerman admits, traditional masculinity is admired by incels as much as it is resentfully despised. I prefer Srinivasan's (2021) conceptualization: incels are on the precipice of a feminist awakening but refuse to take the plunge.

**55** See Rodger (2014) on his "day of retribution": "Who's the alpha male now, bitches?" (113); "Exacting my Retribution is my way of proving my true worth to the world" (135). Digby (2014, 142) aptly labels this fanatical terroristic impulse "sacrificial hypermasculinity."

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