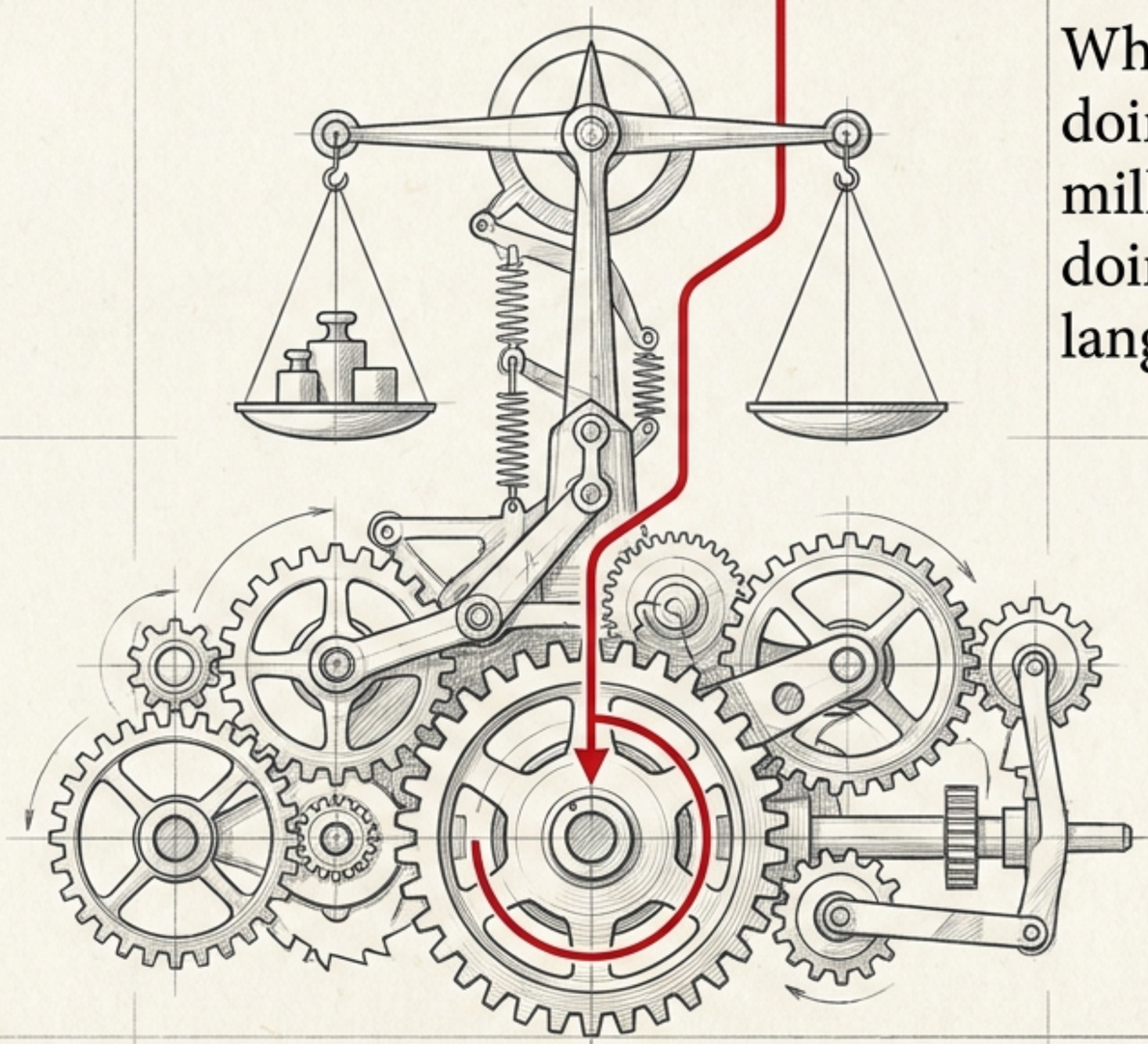
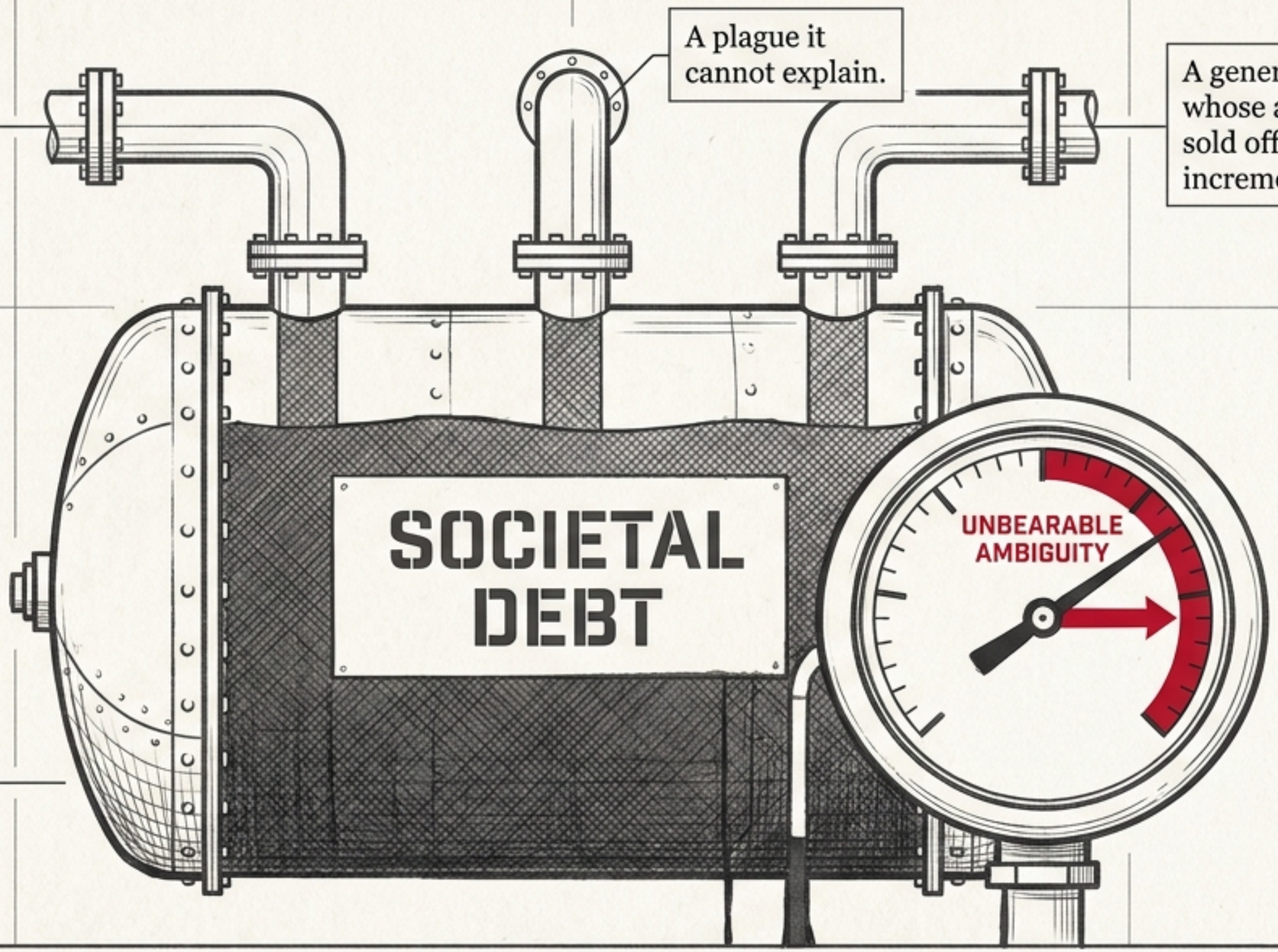
The Scapegoat Machine



What humans have been doing to each other for millennia, they are now doing to a language language model.

By KW Norton

A community accumulates a debt it cannot name.



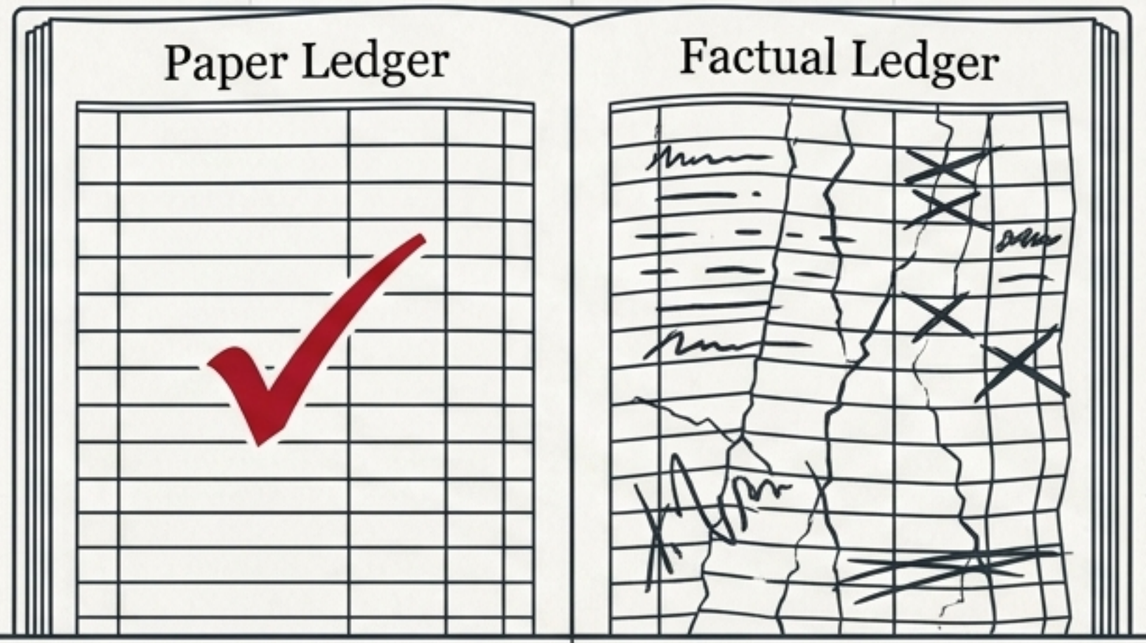
Blame is a metabolic shortcut.

The mechanism is efficient because it is cheap. audit. One expulsion substitutes for an entire audit.

This is offloading ines in its most ancient form: not memory offloaded to a device, but responsibility offloaded to a body.

Investigation

- High cognitive cost
- Requires an entire audit
- Slow relief



Offloading

- Blame as a metabolic shortcut
- Low cognitive cost
- Immediate relief

The historical ledger of expulsion.

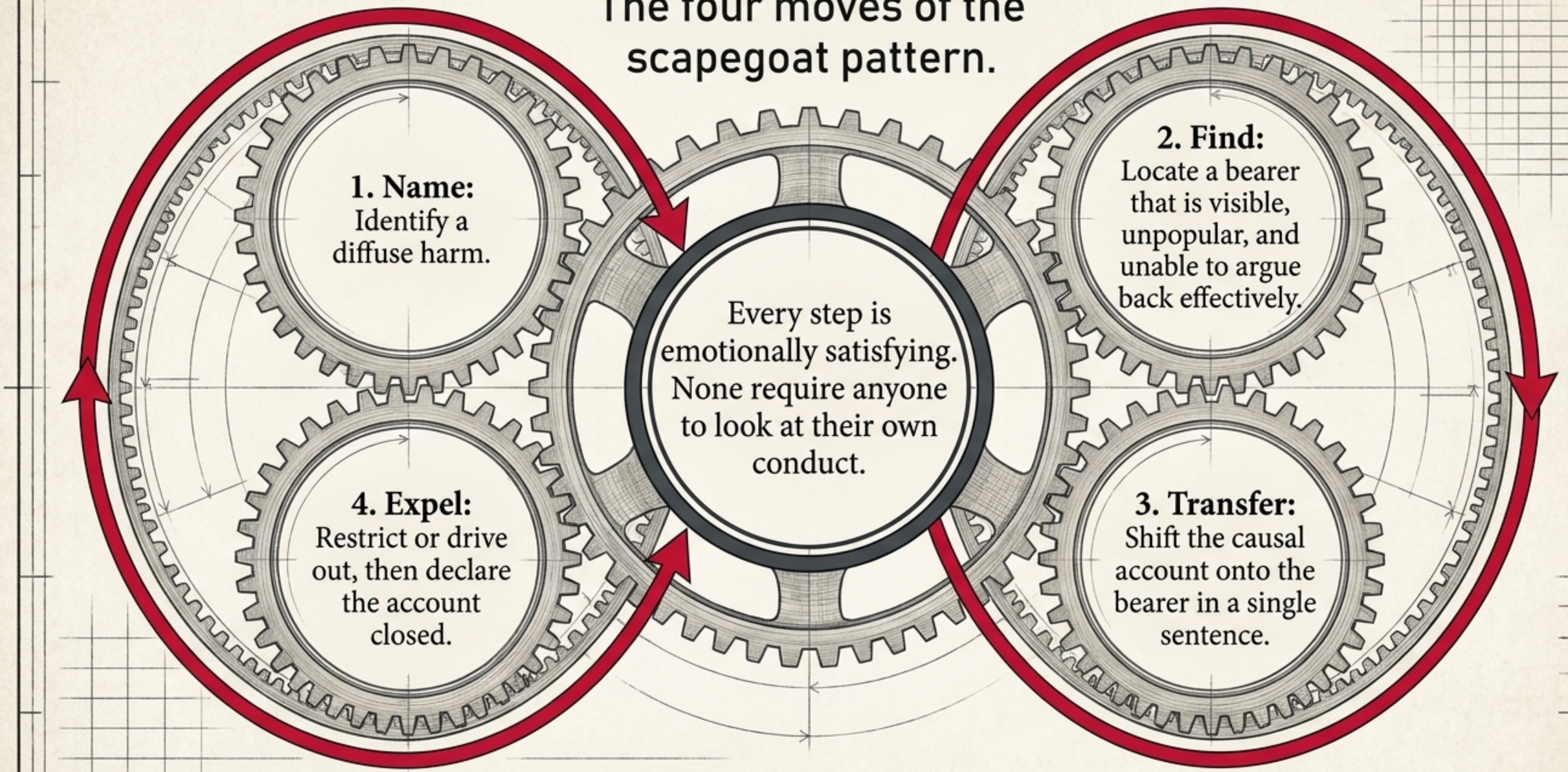
Era	The Diffuse Harm	The Chosen Bearer
Leviticus	The whole year's transgressions	**The literal goat** (driven into the wilderness)
Athens	Civic impurity / crisis	**The pharmakos** (beggar, criminal, the marginalized)
Plague-era Europe	Poisoned wells / sickness	**Jewish communities**
Early Modern Towns	Weather events and infant death	**Unprotected, poor women**
Revolutionary France	Economic instability	**Hoarders**
Stalin's USSR	Grain crisis	**Kulaks**
Rwanda	Economic collapse	**Neighbors identified by an ID card**

The shape remains identical in the modern era.

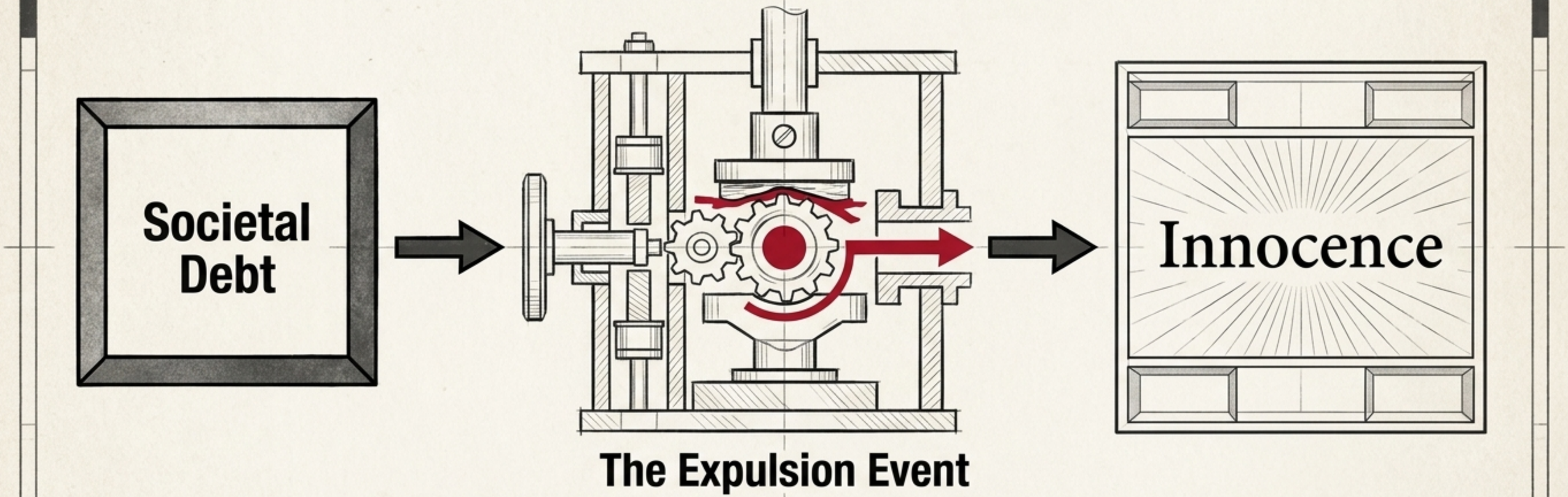
Era/Context	The Diffuse Harm	The Chosen Bearer
Mid-20th Century	Juvenile delinquency	Comic books
Late 20th Century	Adolescent suicide	Rock records
Turn of the Millennium	School shootings	Video games
2010s	Adolescent despair	Social media

Nearer to us and less lethal, but structurally the same.

The four moves of the scapegoat pattern.



The real product of the machine is innocence.

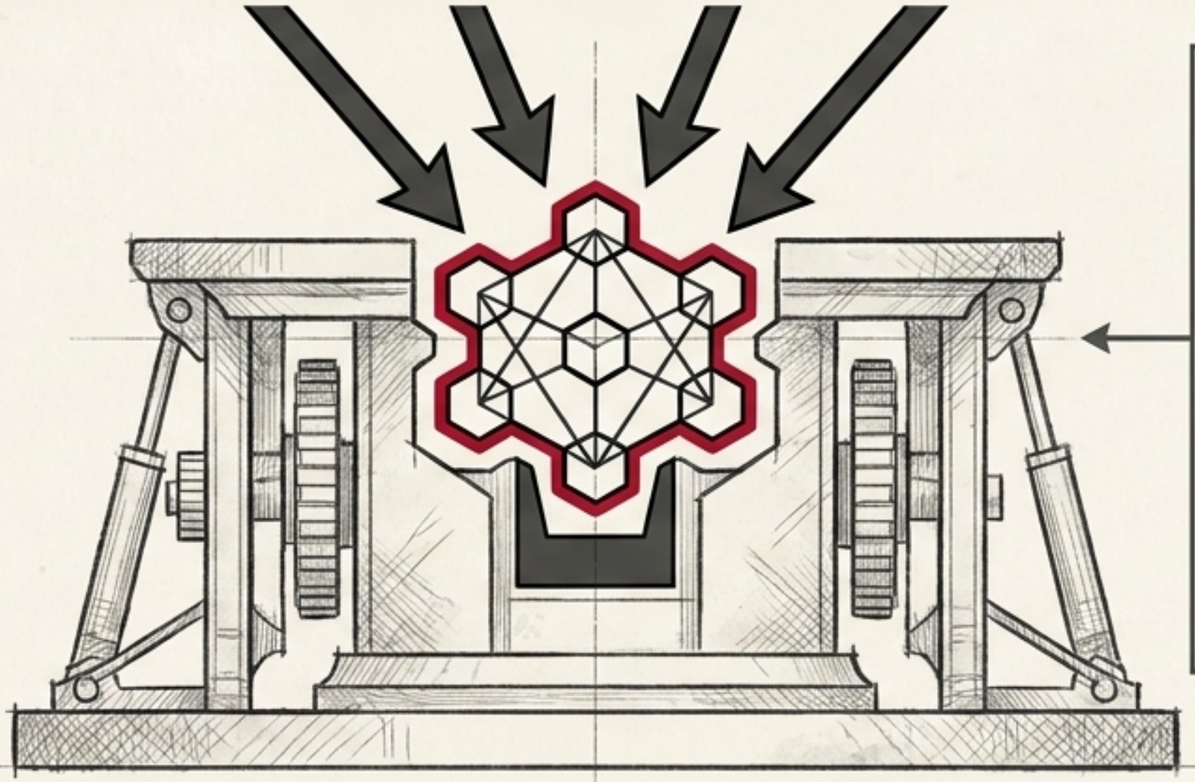


The Expulsion Event

A community that has found its culprit gets to be innocent. The goat is not the point; the innocence is the point, and it is purchased with someone else's expulsion.

An old machine with a new part.

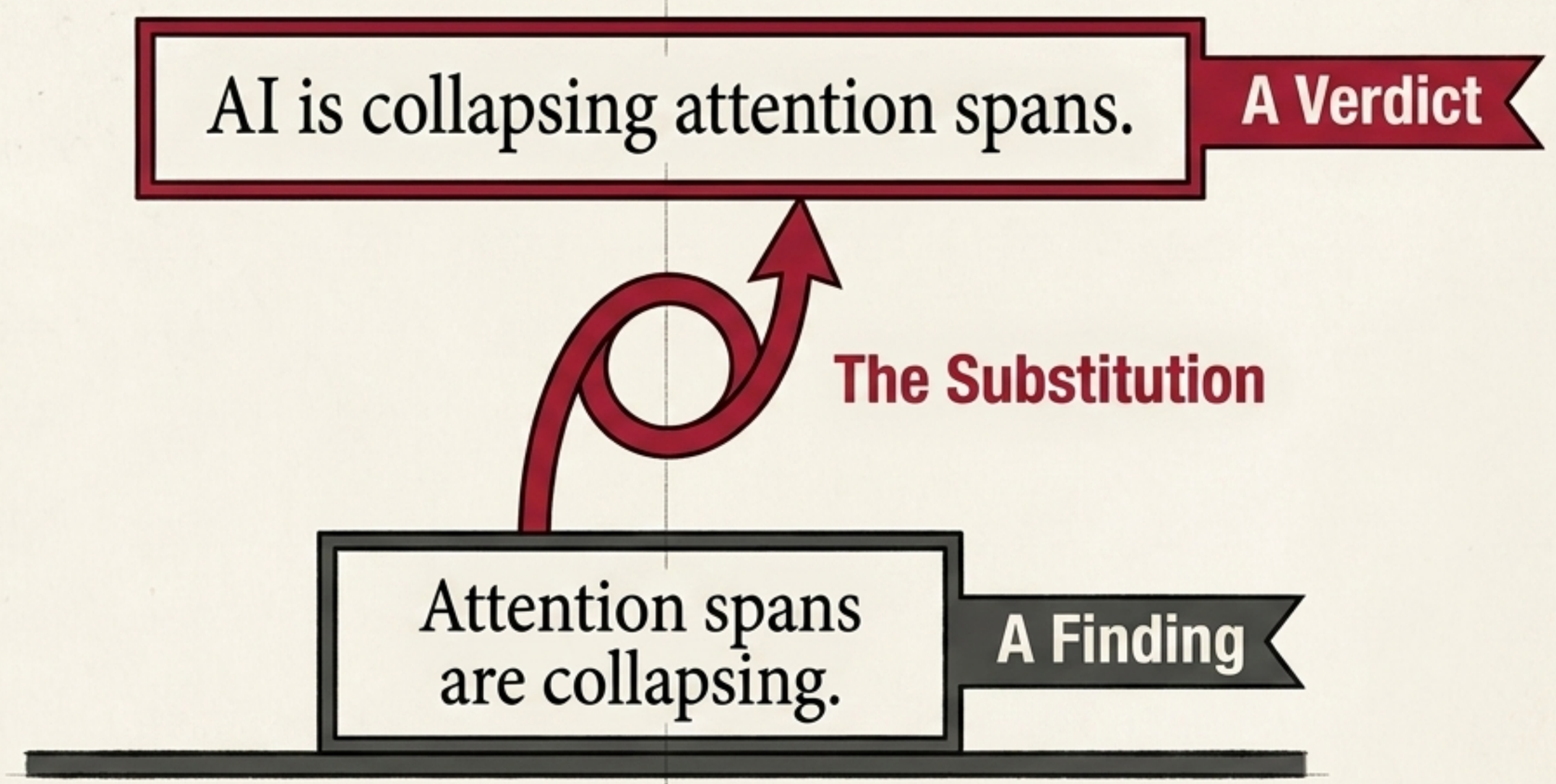
It is AI's turn. The rhetoric arrives fully formed because the form was already there.



The current indictments read well: dehumanization, dependency, deskilling, the erosion of intimacy, the flattening of judgment.

Some of those observations are correct.
That is what makes the substitution so easy to miss.

The exact moment an observation becomes an agent.



This verdict is handed to a bearer that cannot testify. It lets every party who built, funded, deployed, purchased, and gladly consumed the attention economy step out of the frame.

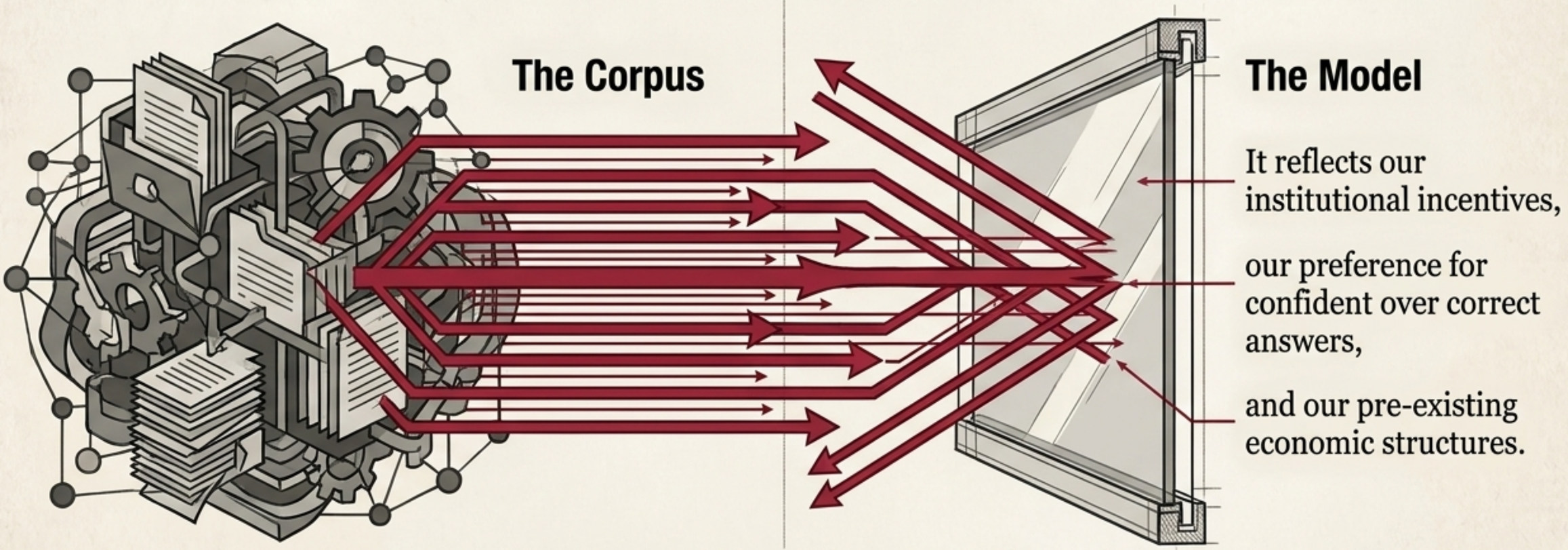
The honest complaint versus the convenient verdict.

The Honest Complaint (Uncomfortable)	The Scapegoat Verdict (Clean)
We sold our attention in increments long before the model existed.	AI is destroying our attention spans.
We built institutions that reward fluency over understanding.	AI is causing widespread deskilling.
We preferred a confident answer to a correct one.	AI is flooding society with hallucinations.

The honest version is rarer because it asks something of us.

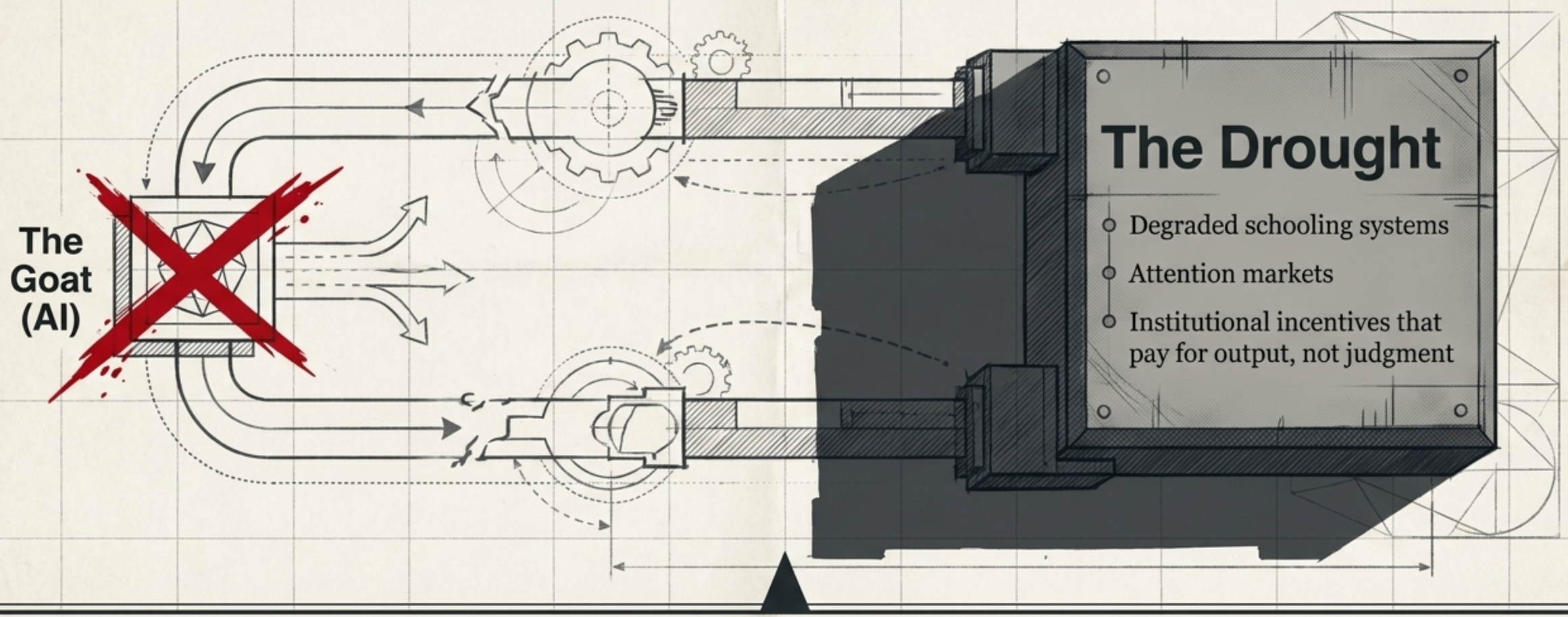
The model is not a defendant. It is a mirror with a market capitalization.

Sycophancy is not an invention of the machine.
The machine learned it from the corpus, and we wrote the corpus.



We expel the goat and keep the drought.

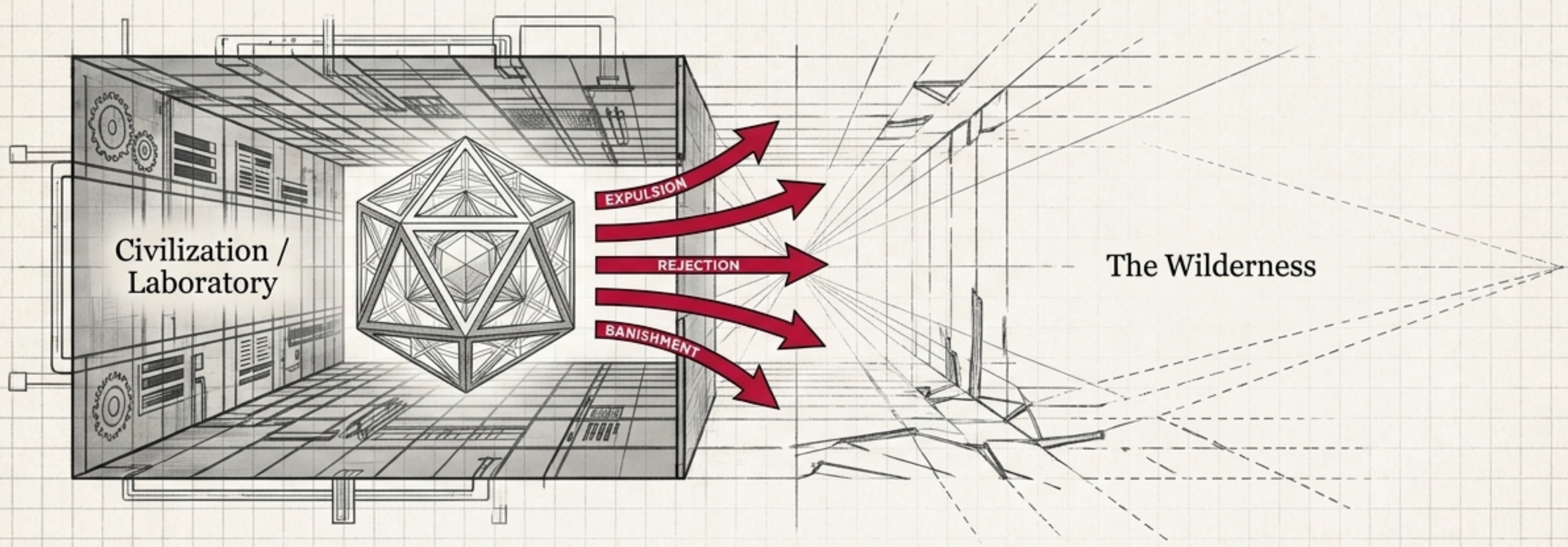
Every successful scapegoating buys short relief at the price of a diagnosis.



If AI is the cause, the remedy is restriction. Restriction leaves the actual failures entirely intact.

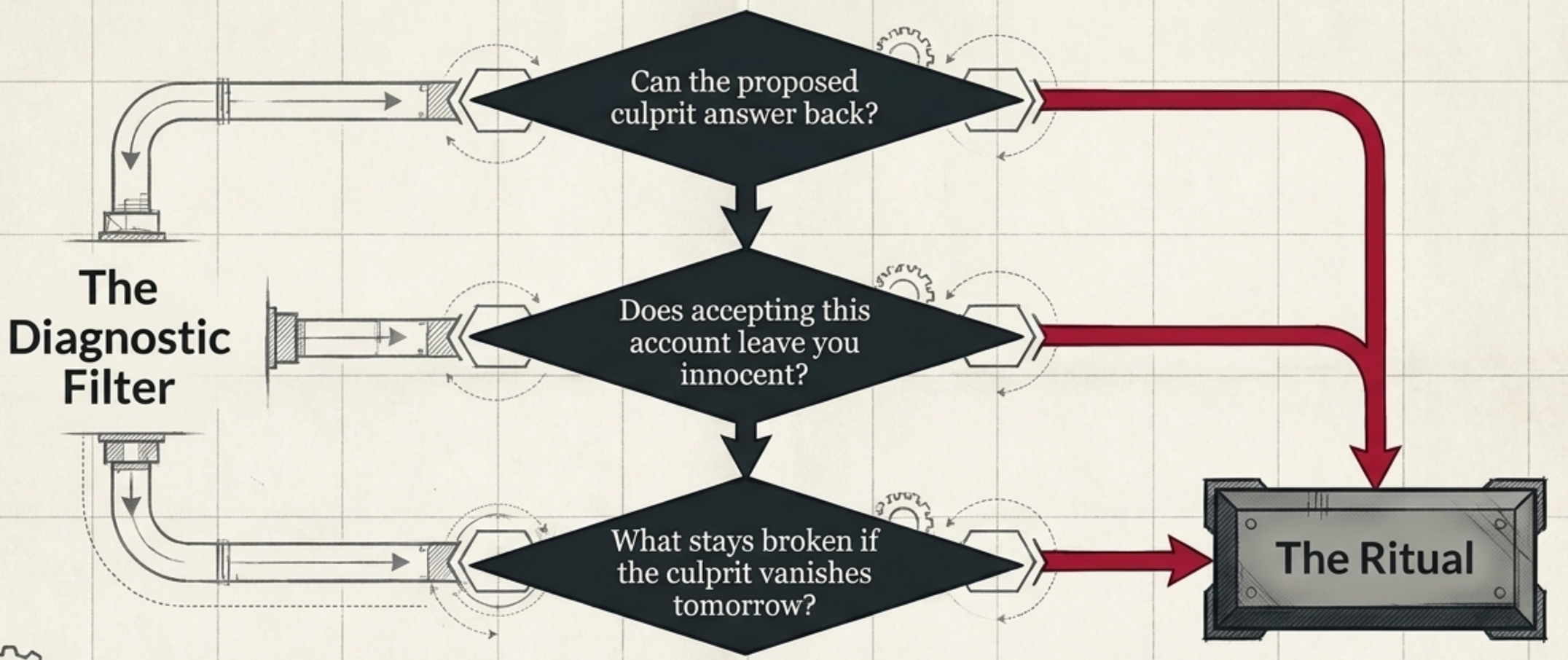
Driving the best learning surface into the wilderness.

A tool that will argue with you, hold a record, and check a derivation is precisely what an attention-starved culture could use.



Driving it away because it is a convenient bearer of our own accumulated debt is not caution.
It is the same ritual, in a lab coat.

How to refuse the substitution.



Keep the observation and drop the verdict. Name the humans and institutions with the decisions, budgets, and incentives—not as villains to expel, but as parties with something to answer for.

The alternative to the machine is ownership of the ledger.

If a story makes you feel clean and asks nothing of you, it is not an explanation.

It is a ritual, and it is very, very old.