

# UNIVERSE 25 – The Mouse Utopia

**What happens when a society has everything it needs – and nothing left to want?**

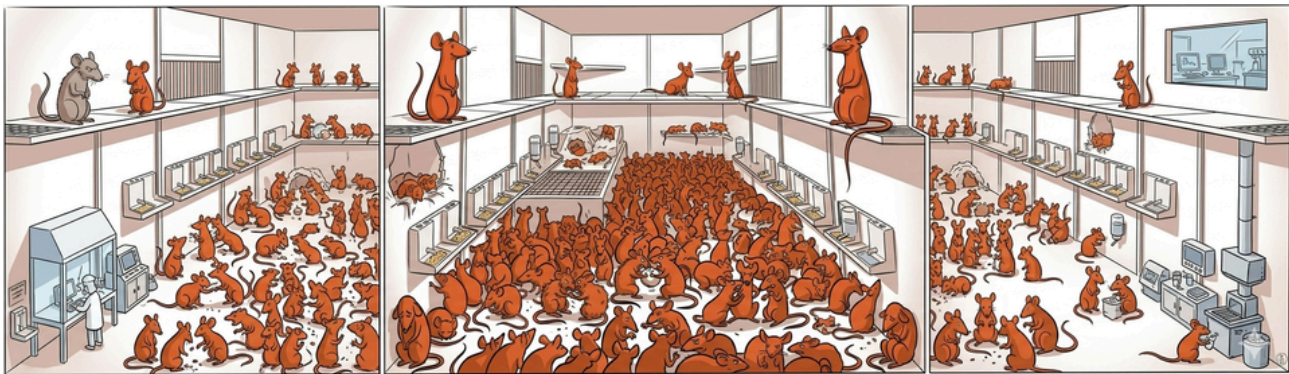
C1 – C2 | Advanced | 90 minutes

In 1968, the American ethologist John B. Calhoun constructed what he believed would be a paradise for mice: a vast, carefully designed enclosure with unlimited food, water, and nesting material, no predators, and no disease. He called it **Universe 25**. What followed was not paradise. It was a slow, methodical collapse – and it changed the way scientists, sociologists, and philosophers think about the relationship between comfort and meaning.

In this lesson, you will discuss the themes of purpose, society, and human nature; watch a documentary extract on the experiment; analyse a challenging academic article; study advanced punctuation; and develop your ability to express complex ideas with precision and depth.

**In this lesson you will:**

- ◆ Discuss utopia, purpose, and the nature of challenge
- ◆ Watch and analyse a documentary video
- ◆ Build advanced academic vocabulary
- ◆ Read and discuss a challenging article about the "Two Deaths" theory
- ◆ Study colons and semi-colons
- ◆ Write a structured homework response



**1 warm up**

Discuss the following questions. Give extended answers with reasons and examples.

- 1. Define Your Utopia.** If you could design a world where every physical need (food, water, shelter, safety) was provided for everyone instantly and for free, what do you think would be the greatest benefit? What might be the greatest drawback?

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- 2. The Nature of Challenge.** Do you believe humans need challenges and obstacles to be happy, or is the ultimate goal of life to reach a state of total ease?

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- 3. Space and Sanity.** How do you feel when you are in a very crowded place (like a packed bus or a concert)? Does your personality or how you treat others change when you feel "cramped in"?

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- 4. Social Roles.** If you grew up in a society where all the "important" jobs (leadership, providing, protecting) were already taken and there was no room for you to contribute, how would you spend your time?

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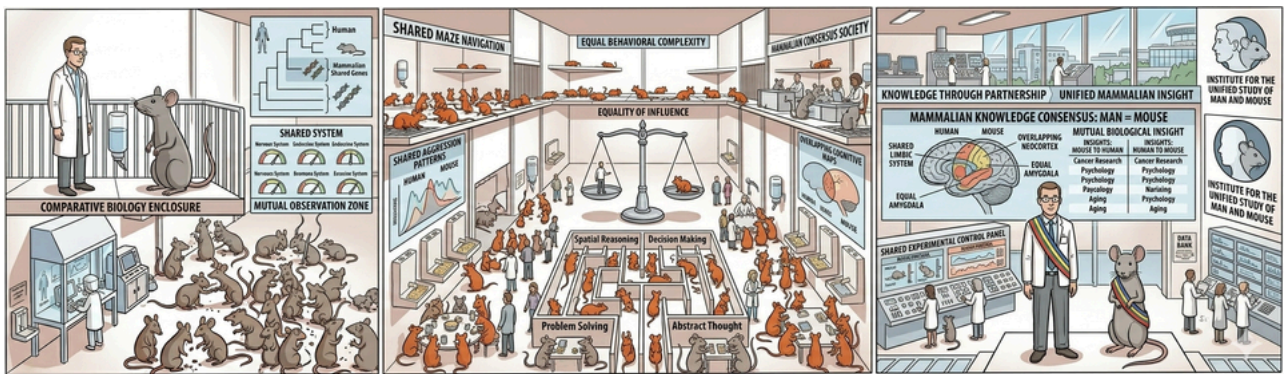
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- 5. The "Mouse" Mirror.** Scientists often study animals like mice to understand human behavior because we share similar biological and social patterns. Do you think a colony of mice would react to "perfect conditions" the same way humans would? Why or why not?

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## 2 video comprehension

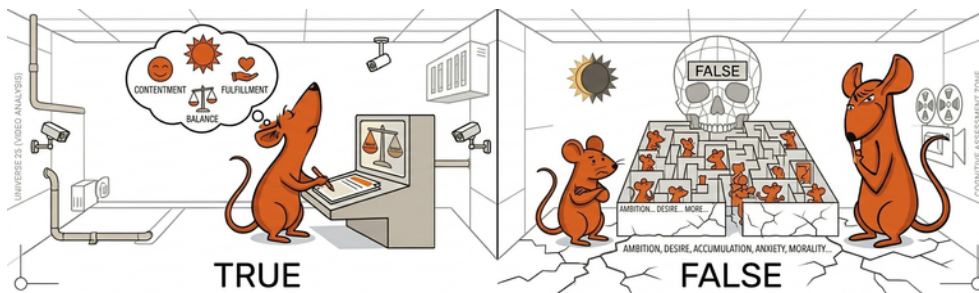
Watch the video and complete both parts below.

Lesson Video — Universe 25 / Calhoun's Mouse Utopia

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ReBJfxHjFU>

**Part A: True or False. Read each statement. Write T (True) or F (False) in the box. If the statement is false, write the correct version on the line below it.**

#	Statement	T / F
1	In Universe 25, the mice had unlimited access to food, water, and nesting materials throughout the experiment.	---
	If false, correct it:	
2	The mouse population in Universe 25 continued to grow steadily until it reached the physical capacity of the enclosure.	---
	If false, correct it:	
3	The behavioral changes Calhoun observed, such as withdrawal and aggression, only began after the mice had completely run out of space.	---
	If false, correct it:	
4	The "beautiful ones" were mice that devoted themselves exclusively to self-grooming and completely withdrew from social interaction and reproduction.	---
	If false, correct it:	
5	Calhoun concluded that physical overcrowding and the depletion of food supplies were the primary causes of the colony's eventual extinction.	---
	If false, correct it:	





**Part B: Comprehension Questions. Answer in full sentences. Focus on main ideas, cause and effect, and interpretation.**

1. What conditions did Calhoun create in Universe 25, and what was his original scientific purpose in designing the experiment?  

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2. How did social behaviour among the mice change as the population grew? What specific patterns emerged?  

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3. Who were the "beautiful ones" and what does their behaviour suggest about the relationship between comfort, purpose, and psychological health?  

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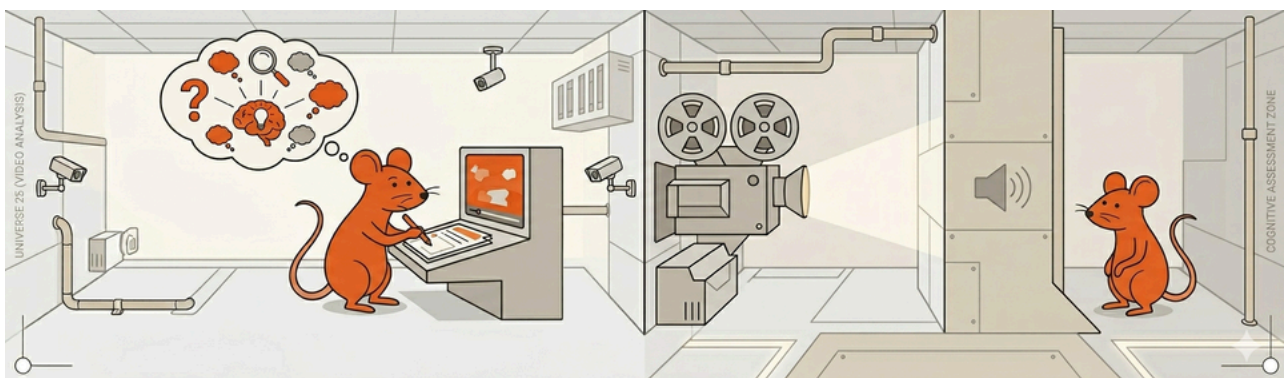
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4. According to Calhoun's interpretation, why did the population begin to collapse even while resources remained available?  

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5. What does the experiment suggest about what living beings – beyond mice – may need in order to sustain a functioning society?  

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### 3 pre-reading vocabulary

Study these words before reading the article. All words appear in the text.

Match each word (1–15) with its correct definition (A–O). Write the letter in the answer column. Definitions are at C1–C2 level.

#	Word / Phrase	Answer	Definition
1	<b>contentious</b>	---	A. The gradual or sudden loss of normal restraint in social behaviour; a collapse of norms
2	<b>sufficiency</b>	---	B. Rooted in or verifiable by direct observation or practical experience, rather than theory alone
3	<b>anomie</b>	---	C. The tendency toward excessive self-focus, self-admiration, and diminished concern for others
4	<b>social cohesion</b>	---	D. The point at which a substance, system, or environment can absorb no more; a state of being overwhelmed
5	<b>manifests</b>	---	E. Causing or likely to generate strong disagreement; debated from opposing positions
6	<b>empirical</b>	---	F. A condition of inner emptiness or lack of meaning, particularly when material needs are met but purpose is absent
7	<b>resilience</b>	---	G. The degree to which members of a group or society are connected by shared norms, trust, and mutual obligation
8	<b>behavioral sink</b>	---	H. To become visible or apparent; to express itself in observable form
9	<b>saturation</b>	---	I. The capacity to absorb disruption, recover from adversity, and adapt without fundamental breakdown
10	<b>narcissism</b>	---	J. Relating to statistical characteristics of a population, such as size, age distribution, or birth and death rates
11	<b>precarious</b>	---	K. The progressive collapse of complex social behaviours caused by extreme or unnatural crowding
12	<b>demographic</b>	---	L. Lacking stability or security; dependent on conditions that could change at any moment
13	<b>precipitates</b>	---	M. Socially unresponsive; present but not contributing or engaging with others in any meaningful way
14	<b>existential vacuum</b>	---	N. An adequate or sufficient amount; the quality of being enough without excess
15	<b>inert</b>	---	O. Causes something significant or damaging to happen suddenly, often before it would otherwise occur

**Extension: Choose three words from the list and use each in an original sentence that reflects a complex idea from society, politics, or psychology.**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

**4 reading**

Read the article silently. Infer meaning from context before checking vocabulary. Comprehension questions follow on the next page.

### The "Two Deaths" Theory: Social Collapse, Meaning, and the Limits of Material Comfort

The "Two Deaths" theory, developed by the ethologist John B. Calhoun, has long occupied a contentious yet instructive position within sociological and philosophical discourse. Although derived from controlled observations, its interpretive value lies in how it frames the relationship between material sufficiency and existential vitality. At its core, the theory proposes that societies may collapse not from scarcity, but from an erosion of meaning and structure. This proposition aligns with classical sociological concerns, particularly those articulated by Émile Durkheim regarding anomie, or normlessness. When individuals lose a sense of role, obligation, or shared purpose, social cohesion begins to fracture in subtle but compounding ways. The theory therefore invites a broader inquiry into whether human flourishing depends as much on symbolic and moral frameworks as on physical security.

The first death, described as the "death of the spirit," can be understood in human terms as a collapse of psychological engagement and social responsibility. In modern societies, this phenomenon often manifests through widespread disengagement, where individuals withdraw from civic life, professional ambition, and interpersonal commitments. Empirical studies in social psychology, such as those examining learned helplessness and motivational decline, suggest that environments lacking challenge can reduce initiative and resilience. Furthermore, the rise of passive consumption behaviors, particularly in digital environments, reflects a shift from participatory existence to observational living. This condition is not merely individual but systemic, as institutions fail to provide meaningful roles that foster identity and contribution. Over time, such disengagement erodes both personal agency and collective functionality.

Closely related to this condition is what Calhoun termed the "behavioral sink," defined as the breakdown of social behaviors due to unnatural crowding, leading to a death of the spirit followed by physical decline. When translated into human contexts, this concept does not depend solely on physical density but on perceived social saturation and competition for attention, status, and recognition. Urban sociology has documented how high-density living, when combined with social fragmentation, can produce stress, aggression, and withdrawal. Studies on urban overstimulation indicate that individuals often cope by reducing social interaction, thereby weakening communal bonds. This adaptive withdrawal, while protective in the short term, contributes to long-term isolation and dysfunction. In this sense, the behavioral sink represents a tipping point where environmental pressure and social disconnection reinforce one another.

A related dimension of this first death is the reconfiguration of identity around superficial or self-contained activities. Contemporary culture often rewards aesthetic self-presentation and individual optimization, sometimes at the expense of communal contribution. Sociologists have noted the emergence of what Christopher Lasch termed the "culture of narcissism," where self-focus replaces social obligation. While self-care and personal development are valuable, their excess can produce individuals who are polished yet socially inert. This mirrors a broader pattern in which individuals maintain physical well-being while neglecting relational and civic responsibilities. The result is a form of existence that appears stable on the surface but lacks substantive engagement beneath.

The breakdown of social roles further intensifies this condition, particularly when traditional structures such as family, community, and vocation lose coherence. Research in family sociology indicates that declining birth rates and shifting parental roles are often linked to broader uncertainties about purpose and stability. Similarly, labor economists have observed that precarious employment and automation can diminish the perceived value of individual contribution. When people no longer see their actions as meaningful within a larger system, motivation declines and social bonds weaken. This aligns with Durkheim's findings that suicide rates increase in contexts where social integration is low. The death of the spirit, therefore, is not an abstract concept but a measurable decline in social vitality.



The second death, defined as physical extinction, represents the eventual consequence of sustained social and psychological breakdown. In human societies, this does not necessarily imply immediate disappearance but can be observed through demographic decline and reduced life expectancy in certain contexts. Countries with

persistently low fertility rates, such as Japan and parts of Europe, provide empirical examples of populations that struggle to reproduce themselves. Demographers link these trends not only to economic factors but also to shifting values and diminished incentives for family formation. When the will to sustain future generations weakens, the continuity of society becomes uncertain. Thus, the second death emerges as a delayed but predictable outcome of the first.

From a philosophical perspective, the "Two Deaths" framework resonates with existentialist concerns about meaning and authenticity. Thinkers such as Viktor Frankl have argued that the absence of purpose can lead to what he termed an "existential vacuum," characterized by apathy and despair. Frankl's clinical observations, grounded in both psychology and lived experience, demonstrate that humans require a sense of meaning to endure and thrive. Without it, even materially comfortable conditions can become psychologically intolerable. This insight reinforces the idea that survival is not merely biological but deeply tied to symbolic and moral dimensions. The death of the spirit, in this sense, precedes and precipitates physical decline.

Critics of the "Two Deaths" theory argue that human societies possess adaptive capacities that exceed those of simpler organisms, particularly through culture, innovation, and institutional reform. Indeed, historical evidence shows that societies can recover from crisis through new forms of organization and meaning-making. However, this does not invalidate the warning embedded in the theory; rather, it reframes it as a conditional risk rather than an inevitable outcome. The lesson is not that comfort leads directly to collapse, but that comfort without purpose creates vulnerability. For advanced learners, the theory serves as a lens through which to examine contemporary issues such as urban isolation, digital dependency, and declining civic engagement. Ultimately, it challenges us to consider whether progress, defined narrowly as material abundance, is sufficient to sustain a meaningful and enduring human society.



## Glossary

### 1. Discourse

Serious discussion or written communication on a specific topic.

### 2. Interpretive

Related to explaining or giving meaning to something.

### 3. Existential

Connected to human existence, meaning, and purpose in life.

### 4. Normlessness

A state where social norms are weak, unclear, or absent.

### 5. Civic

Related to the duties and activities of people in a society.

### 6. Participatory

Involving active engagement rather than passive observation.

### 7. Systemic

Affecting or relating to an entire system, not just one part.

### 8. Communal

Shared by a group, especially within a community.

### 9. Coherence

The quality of being logical, consistent, and well-organized.

### 10. Integration

The process of combining individuals into a unified whole.

### 11. Extinction

The complete end or disappearance of a group or population.

### 12. Incentives

Factors that motivate or encourage someone to act.

### 13. Authenticity

The quality of being genuine, real, or true to oneself.

### 14. Institutional

Related to established systems, structures, or organizations in society.

**4 reading comprehension**

Answer in full sentences. Use evidence from the article and your own reasoning.

1. **Main Idea.** According to the article, what is the central proposition of the "Two Deaths" theory, and why does the author describe it as both contentious and instructive?

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2. **Interpretation.** The article argues that the "behavioral sink" in human societies does not depend solely on physical density. What does it depend on instead, and what evidence does the article provide?

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3. **Critical Thinking.** The article describes individuals who are "polished yet socially inert." What does this phrase mean, and what social trend does it represent? Do you see evidence of this in modern society?

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4. **The Two Deaths.** Explain in your own words what the article means by the "first death" and the "second death." What is the relationship between them? What real-world examples does the article use to support the second death?

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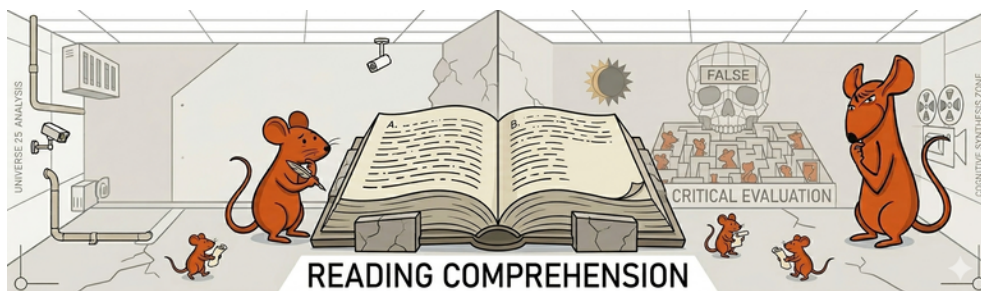
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5. **Social Meaning & Purpose.** Viktor Frankl's concept of the "existential vacuum" is cited in the article. How does this concept strengthen the argument of the "Two Deaths" theory? In what way does it suggest that survival is not merely biological?

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**5 language point: colons and semi-colons**

Study the rules, then complete the exercises. Apply these in your own writing.

**The Colon ( : ) and the Semi-Colon ( ; )**

Mark	Primary Function	Key Rule
<b>Colon ( : )</b>	Introduces what follows: a list, an explanation, a quotation, or a consequence that is directly signalled by the first clause.	What comes before the colon must be a complete independent clause. What follows amplifies or specifies it.
<b>Semi-Colon ( ; )</b>	Connects two independent clauses that are closely related in meaning, without using a conjunction. Can also separate complex list items that contain their own commas.	Both sides of the semi-colon must be able to stand alone as complete sentences. It shows balance or contrast.

**COLON – LIST**

*"Calhoun observed three distinct phases: population growth, behavioral decline, and total collapse."*

**COLON – EXPLANATION**

*"The result was paradoxical: the mice had everything they needed and yet destroyed themselves."*

**SEMI-COLON – LINKED CLAUSES**

*"The first death erodes purpose; the second follows as an inevitable consequence."*

**SEMI-COLON – COMPLEX LIST**

*"The study drew on data from Tokyo, Japan; Seoul, South Korea; and Berlin, Germany."*

**i Common confusion:** A colon looks *forward* – it says "here is what I mean." A semi-colon looks *sideways* – it says "this connects to what came before." Never use a semi-colon to introduce a list.

**Part B – Controlled Practice. Insert a colon ( : ) or semi-colon ( ; ) in the correct position. Write your choice in the blank.**

- The theory identifies two forms of collapse \_\_\_\_\_ a spiritual death and a physical one.
- Modern societies face a troubling paradox \_\_\_\_\_ comfort has increased dramatically, yet reported levels of meaning and connection have declined.  
Some individuals withdrew from all social contact \_\_\_\_\_ others became increasingly aggressive and territorial.
- The researchers noted three warning signs \_\_\_\_\_ declining birth rates, rising rates of social withdrawal, and a collapse in civic participation.
- Frankl argued that meaning is not optional \_\_\_\_\_ it is the foundation on which all other aspects of psychological health rest.
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**Part C – Free Practice. Write your own original sentences as instructed below.**

- Write a sentence about modern society using a **colon to introduce an explanation**.

\_\_\_\_\_

- Write a sentence about ambition or purpose using a **colon to introduce a list**.

\_\_\_\_\_

- Write two contrasting ideas about human nature connected with a **semi-colon**.

\_\_\_\_\_

6

discussion

Give extended answers. Support your opinion with reasons and specific examples from the video, article, or your own experience.

**"The mouse utopia became a mouse dystopia —notbecause the mice lacked anything, butbecause they lacked something to do with themselves."**

*—paraphrase of Calhoun's conclusions*

- The article argues that "comfort without purpose creates vulnerability." Do you agree with this claim? Can you think of real societies or historical examples where this pattern has played out — or where it has been successfully resisted?  

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- Both the video and the article suggest that the loss of meaningful social roles is more dangerous than physical discomfort. In your view, what kinds of roles give people the deepest sense of meaning — and are modern societies doing enough to protect or create them?  

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- The article describes individuals who are "polished yet socially inert" and connects this to the "culture of narcissism." How far do you think social media and digital culture are accelerating this trend? What evidence do you see in your own environment?  

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- The article mentions that critics argue humans have adaptive capacities that mice do not — including culture, innovation, and institutional reform. Do you think these capacities are sufficient to prevent the kind of collapse Calhoun described? What conditions would need to be in place?  

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- Viktor Frankl survived a Nazi concentration camp and argued that meaning — not comfort — is what sustains human life. How does his experience and theory challenge or support the conclusions of Universe 25? What does this comparison reveal about human nature?  

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**Transcript**

Cannibalism, asexuality, and violence. A society that had collapsed. What’s going on here? In 1972, John B Calhoun detailed the specifications of an utopia designed for mice: built in the laboratory. Every aspect of Universe 25, as this particular model was called, was designed to cater for the well-being of its rodent residents, increase their lifespan, and allow them to mate. There was abundant food, water, and nesting material. The universe was cleaned regularly. There were no predators, the temperature stable. Paradise. Or maybe not? Four pairs of disease-free mice, selected from the National Institutes of Health’s elite breeding colony, moved in on day one. It took months for the rodents to familiarize themselves with their new world. Then they started to reproduce and the population increased exponentially, doubling every fifty-five days. Those were the good times in paradise. Past day 315, more than six hundred mice now lived in Universe 25, rubbing shoulders on their way up and down the stairwells to eat, drink, and sleep. Population growth slowed. Young ones found themselves born into a world with far more mice than meaningful social roles. Males faced a lot of competitors to defend their territory against. Many found that so stressful, they gave up. Normal discourse within the community broke down, and with it the ability of mice to form social bonds. Lone females retreated to isolated nesting boxes on penthouse levels. Other males, a group Calhoun termed “the beautiful ones,” never sought sex and never fought — they just ate, slept, and groomed, wrapped in narcissistic introspection. Elsewhere, cannibalism, asexuality, and violence became endemic. Mouse society had collapsed. On day 560 the population peaked at 2,200 mice. A few survived past weaning until day six hundred, after which there were few pregnancies and no surviving young. As the population had stopped regenerating itself, its path to extinction was clear. The mice had lost the capacity to rebuild their numbers—many that could still conceive, such as the “beautiful ones” and their secluded singleton female counterparts, had lost the social ability to do so. On day 920 was the last conception. The last mouse died on May 23 1973, four years and ten months after colonization. Calhoun later said that the creatures had died two deaths. The first was that of their spirit and their society. The “second death” was that of their physical body. It was not the first time the ethologist had built a world for rodents. Calhoun had been creating utopian environments for rats and mice since the 1940s, with consistent results: overpopulation leads to explosive violence and hypersexual activity, followed by asexuality, self-destruction, and extinction. In his widely cited paper, “Population Density and Social Pathology”, Calhoun concluded: No matter how sophisticated we are, once the number of individuals capable of filling social roles greatly exceeds the number of such roles, only violence and disruption can follow. He then referred to a phenomenon he called “Behavioral Sink” Behavioral sink is our desire to be in the presence of others, to be conditioned to seek to be near others, and to be drawn to the crowd, in spite of the conflicts that this can generate. Drawing from Calhoun’s popular research, social scientists started to call for restrictions on reproduction as the only possible response to the world’s rising population. Calhoun himself was more optimistic about our future. He argued: as our physical space declines, we are forced to extend a conceptual space — our network of ideas and technologies. Later in his career he turned to possible solutions and began to build creative universes that minimize the ill effects of overcrowding. What are your thoughts? Is overcrowding a danger for mankind or does it only affect rodents? And if so, what can save the human psyche? Avoiding eye contact in crowded places is one strategy, but is that enough? To read more about Universe 25, and its cultural impact, read the paper of Edmund Ramsden & Jon Adams.





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