

The simplest truth about human life is this: we, as thinking, breathing, feeling individuals are shrouded in a false reality constructed of ideologies created by our ancestors, blinding us from our true identities. How did our culturally accepted notion of reality develop into spending the first quarter of life being “educated” about man-made topics, working in a field to earn man-made currency, then spending a final sliver of time, free to retire from our own constructed obligations? How did we create such a divide between ourselves and the animal kingdom, a community we are still just as categorized in? And why do we refuse to accept and discuss death, a fear that (I believe) each of us holds quietly in our minds but rarely discuss? Our looming mortality gnaws at our conscience as we push it down further, forcing it away from our attention, refusing to accept it as our fate, shoving it to the dustiest and most untouched corners of our being. And when we *do* look our mortality square in the face, the true meaning of every-day life can shatter and leave us confused, bewildered, pressured to do something great. We are but one speck in an endless sea of stars – can we make our existence impactful to the rest of humanity? This is the human condition – the deal that for the price of life, we must grapple with our understanding of the soul, the meaning of life, and our unavoidable mortality.

The human condition is, for me, a somewhat newly discovered topic when it comes to my personal understanding of human life and humanity as a whole. Or maybe it is fairer to say that I had considered most of the different aspects of the human condition, but never combined them all under one title. As I grow older and verge on adulthood, I continue to think more seriously about how I want to spend the rest of my life and what will happen to my soul after I pass on. On top of these reasons, I personally believe the only way to be truly happy, happy down to the very tips of my toes, is to lead a fulfilling life in pursuit of whatever it is that I am truly passionate about. I know I want more than a cubical nine-to-five life, but how I come to understand *what* I want and who I am is a different story entirely.

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At some point during the process of evolution, humans moved slowly up the food chain, evolving to be stronger and smarter over time. Languages were created and refined, processes to understand how the world works and why were formulated and studied again and again, and ideas of how to bring about (and sustain) a singular culture were tested. Rules were instated by some form of authority, dictating everything from the way we eat, to the way we dress and how much modesty is needed for everyday life, to the amount of education should be given to each individual. Every aspect of life has been influenced to some degree by human constructs, and little is left (if anything at all) that is purely animalistic.

Though these specific examples relate more to Western culture than that of humanity globally, the idea of constructs taking on an identity of what we can only call “normal” or “core” is what is key. As author and psychoanalysis Allen Wheelis states in his novel *The Way We Are*, “as man emerged from the condition of animal, there must have been a period of transition during which the carriers of the process could not have known what was happening to them or even that a change was taking place. Now in retrospect we can see it as an expansion of awareness which brought into being freedom and choice” (Wheelis 45). Thus, evolution sparked human curiosity toward the inner workings of the earth and the universe, and with the evidence humans found, there is a better way to grasp the world. This is a positive reason for our transformation into the beings we are today, and our increased knowledge and awareness in such

a relatively short amount of time is astounding. But by seeking this knowledge humans gradually forgot about their roots in the animal kingdom, essentially leaving them behind altogether.

We now see these constructs as simply what *is*, as though these ideas of hierarchy and civility and modesty were given to us before the age of time. Each new building block added to what we know as the “average life” creating an increasingly structured way of collecting people into one large database, while simultaneously creating greater distance from humans and their primal, animalistic base. It seems with this distance and the constant need to feel involved with a like-minded group of people, humans have become extremely caught up in society and have forgotten what life truly means.

Finding meaning can stem from learning how to be consciously present. All too often, we are so concerned with the future and preparing for the future that we lose touch with our current surroundings. As Henry David Thoreau wrote in *Walden*, “we are determined to be starved before we are hungry (Thoreau 75). The entirety of the chapter “What I Lived For” in *Walden* discusses what it means to consciously live deliberately, which is a factor that can contribute to finding purpose in life. Thoreau questions the intentions of the modern civilized human, asking “why is it that men give so poor an account of their day if they have not been slumbering?” (Thoreau 73). It seems we have lost our way on the global path to fulfillment.

However, there is the nihilistic approach to life. Nihilism is the idea that there is no objective meaning to human existence and that life is an ambiguous collection of organic compounds. This approach can be difficult for many to accept, as we push for finding a purpose throughout our lives. But many argue that because there cannot be a proven overall duty humans must perform, or an authority who dictates these rules in the first place, there simply cannot be a purpose to human life.

But within the confines of our planet and our society, can I make a mark with my life that will change how people see the world and leave a streak on the page of humanity for others to remember me by? And above all, are we *obligated* use our one opportunity at human life to make an impact to others? In some ways, having a message that is remembered by others (whether this be a few or many) is almost synonymous to living beyond one’s physical life span. Perhaps this is why there is such an emphasis on making a lifetime fulfill something great, not only to the one who is living, but also to those around him or her.

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With growing awareness and a hunger for meaning comes knowledge as well as fear. Wheelis writes “in animals, fear is episodic; in humans, because of their enlarged consciousness, fear is constant” (Wheelis 31). Fear is ingrained into an animal’s being as a mechanism for protection, but the degree of fear is radically escalated in human beings. Growing awareness of our surroundings, combined with the aching desire to fit into society, causes a constant state of distress, no matter how big or small in scale. A major source of anxiety for humans is the fear of being ostracized. Because the social constructs mentioned above are very specific and, one could say, exclusive, combined with the core animalistic desire to belong in humans, a sense of “group identity” is extremely important to human beings. The two factors of outward influence and our human nature makes us much more susceptible to social anxiety, a product of civilization that probably was not predicted.

And it is fair to say that most fears, no matter how obscure, ultimately stem from a fear of mortality. Even the fear of being ostracized can blossom from a fear of death, beginning with worries about not finding a cultural identity, leading to a fear of spending life alone, leading to a fear of having wasted a life, leading to a fear of looking back and being disappointed, leading ultimately to a fear of the end of life. In general, fears can be justified and then proven wrong. But for mortality? There is nothing. Not a single individual can give a wholly proven response to what happens after our bodies shut down, the oxygen stops flowing, and our souls are left to either decompose with our physical selves or be released into the universe. Studies have been conducted to understand the concept of what happens next, if there is another life, and those who have died and experience resuscitation recount similar versions of the same story – seeing lights, seeing loved ones, seeing tunnels. But what can this even mean? Is there really something else?

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The human condition is also concerned with the idea of embodying a soul. In Gilbert Ryle's *The Concept of the Mind*, he writes that the soul is synonymous to the mind – Plato said that “in thinking the soul is talking to itself” (Ryle 27). Ryle, a British philosopher from the mid-twentieth century, states that the soul has three main parts: feeling, thought, and will. This supports the philosophy of the Dualists, who believe the mind is immaterial and separate from the physical body. Dualists strive to answer the question of how the immaterial mind controls the material body, and later, what happens to the mind when the body expires. Opposing the Dualists are the Monists, whose philosophy that every aspect of a human is physically one. Monists believe that everything is physically *here*, without a spiritual aspect to the universe. In turn, having a unified mind and body means that at the moment of death, the entirety of the human stops.

There have been debates over whether the soul, if it should exist, is a physical matter or a purely spiritual (or immeasurable) entity. Scientist Duncan MacDougall measured patient's body-weights before and after death to determine whether or not souls have a physical quality (for the record, he concluded that there was in fact a weight loss, but his theory has been disproved by so many other scientists and researchers that it is impossible to use as reliable data). Though there isn't proof of a physical soul, this does not necessarily mean its existence is impossible.

But if there *isn't* a soul, what is it that makes us, as feeling, breathing, living creatures, uniquely alive in this world? If science is correct, our minds hold the key to understanding *who* we are exactly, but is that enough to satisfy our hunger to understand all that we can about ourselves and our world?

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As seen above, there is no way to qualify human life as “simple” or “easy.” With so many topics (most unanswered) swirling in and out of our conscious minds, it is a wonder we are able to survive without daily meltdowns – perhaps it is fair to say that our culture has unlocked the understanding of distraction. Either way, the conditions of being human are immensely large, making them seem even more looming than they already are. But my hope in this journey is to dust off a few corners of the massively impending questions, trying to find something to grasp,

just as my predecessors have and the continuing generations will. And hopefully my journey will spark as many questions for others as it did for me.

In essence, what exactly am I doing here?

The questions ever continue.

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