

Referencing philosophers of the past century, I explored the limitations of the human condition in order to understand my own existential crises. I also attempted to uncover the possible basis of other's struggles with finding meaning and purpose in life. I shot black and white silver gelatin photos of myself and then edited myself out to depict the idea of absence vs. existence, in line with Sartre's idea that existence precedes essence.

Philosophic existentialism causes me to question my own being, despite this I have come to conclude that I am real and that my essence interacts with others to form a whole. This photo series aims to confirm this assertion.

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An Existential Crisis is a moment at which an individual questions the very foundations of their life: whether this life has any meaning, purpose, or value.¹ An existential crisis is brought about by self-inflicted emotional strains, which lead to states of confusion and distraught along with awe. These moments bring us to question everything we thought we once knew. Questions like, how far does the universe expand, or, are we real? We often see the vastness of the universe as something to be afraid of; that we are incapable of wrapping our brains around. We have to cope with our limitations and realize that we cannot get around being weak or not having the knowledge we should have in order to understand everything there is. The human condition is defined as, “The positive and negative aspects of existence as a human being, esp. The inevitable events such as birth, childhood, adolescence, love, sex, reproduction, aging, and death.”² This condition is something we feel trapped by and ignore in order to stay sane and out of existential crisis, but should instead be taken advantage of. Who are we? What is our purpose? Do I even matter? How do I cope? Am I real? These are just a few of the many questions I dissect in this paper.

I have often found myself questioning my purpose and whether or not I matter in the grand scheme of things. I am just a small being in a seemingly infinite universe I could not even begin to comprehend. We are all just collections of atoms moving and coming together only to decay a short while in the future. For all we know, our universe could just be the atom on a body of another being in another universe much larger than our own; and their universe is only a single atom on the body of another being in another universe larger than theirs, and so on and so forth. How do we know if we are real? Are we just figments of our own imagination? Am I just overthinking everything? These are the questions I ask myself every day. This is why I live in a constant state of existential crisis.

I think about the vastness of our earth and all the people that have walked the planet in the past, and all those who will step foot in the future. How can I matter when there are billions of people at this moment, living and dying and breathing the same air I exhaled only a few moments ago. I’m sure the places that I find comfort in and think of as my own have been thought of in that sense by many others, therefore asking me whether or not anything is special to me. Am I unique at all? Although I am “unique” in the sense that no one has lived their life the exact same way that I have, I find it hard to feel like my life matters. We are all similar in some sense and are all trying to achieve the same goal; a somewhat easy life and a painless death. It seems like it doesn’t matter in the end that you’re special or talented, it just matters that you’re successful and make something of yourself and figure out some purpose for your life in the end. People die everyday and we all continue moving, without feeling that impact. How can anything matter when we can see our impending death coming either an hour from now to sometime forty years in the future. Who will continue my work once I’m dead? Will it even matter to anyone else?

I often find myself thinking about the vastness of the universe and what lies beyond what we know. Is there other life within the milky way? Is there any beyond? Are we alone? Am I alone? Then again, how can I know about these things when I don’t even know who I am as a person and I am far from understanding my purpose, along with the purpose of mankind. I don’t know how to feel significant when I don’t know how large space extends and where it stops. I can’t help thinking about whether or not there is a wall at the end of the universe, and if there is

¹ Crisis Intervention Strategies, Gilliland, Burl E., and Richard K. James.

² Dictionary.com's 21st Century Lexicon.

anything beyond it. I can't help but wonder where the universe stops or starts and how small I am in comparison to everything else. I am so small.

I am currently beginning to think about college, and am always asked, "What do you want to major in?" and "What do you see yourself doing in the future?" How am I supposed to know? I'm 16 years old, live with my parents and haven't even graduated high school. I don't understand how I am supposed to determine a future I can't even see. I try to act like I know what I'm doing, but I never really do. I am such a small piece of the planet. I am so insignificant.

Why do we eat healthy? Why do we protect ourselves? Why don't we do drugs? Why don't we take every advantage of being human before we die? So what if cigarettes kill? Everything kills. Being human kills.

The existential crisis has everything to do with the state of being human. When one thinks about themselves in comparison to people, things and the universe, that's when they begin to question everything they thought was true. In existentialism, there are two types of believers; theists and secularists.³ Those who believe in God and those who don't. However, I do not think that existentialism rests on the existence of God. German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche said, "Where is God? God is Dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we, murderers of all murders, console ourselves?"⁴ His words ask us how we shall deal with the death of God and how we shall exist without him along with who God is in the narrative of human life. Nietzsche also defines our version of existentialism as one without God, trying to ask the believers how they have lived so long without him, while still thinking he is alive, begging them to question whether or not he was ever there to begin with. French Philosopher and Playwright Sartre has a version of existentialism that puts forward the idea of "existence precedes essence."⁵ This idea makes us responsible for our actions and creation. He later says "We are left alone, without excuse,"⁶ yet again holding us accountable for our behavior. The study of existentialism attempts to help humans realize the human purpose and find responsibility for our existence. Why are we here? What are we meant to do for this world? These questions are still being explored and will be looked into for the rest of humanity. Does learning about the human condition help me understand my own existence and purpose? Or does it simply put me into a greater state of crisis.

In existentialism, there are the ideas of vastness and accommodation. "Vastness refers to anything that is experienced as being much larger than the self, or the self's ordinary experience or frame of reference,"⁷ and accommodation is defined as "[The] process of adjusting mental structures that cannot assimilate a new experience...such experiences can be disorienting and even frightening...since they make the self feel small, powerless and confused."⁸ These two elements combined make up some of the largest subjects in the study of life, and most importantly, the studies of awe. Awe is a feeling that makes us baffled by the world. This plays a part in existentialism because it creates questions about the universe like how it works and how it came to be. These ideas and especially those about feeling small play a huge role in

³ Haidt, Jonathan and Keltner, Dacher. "Approaching Awe, a moral, spiritual, and aesthetic emotion."

⁴ Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm, and Walter Arnold Kaufmann. "The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs." 1974.

⁵ Sartre, Jean-Paul. "Existentialism is a Humanism." 1946.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid, 304.

⁸ "Approaching Awe, a moral, spiritual, and aesthetic emotion." 304.

existentialism and these moments of awe often lead to existential crisis. When we have these moments of new experience, we become frightened and confused. Moments like these give us a deeper understanding of the universe, but often lead us to question how we didn't feel this same way before. These feelings of epiphany scare us into thinking about how vast the world is. You ask yourself, "how can I matter when I am only a small being?" And this brings about the idea of vastness. Like accommodation, the idea of vastness makes us feel small. It is the idea that we are smaller than everyone and everything on this planet. When one begins to think about the size of the universe, they go into crisis. How can we feel okay when we don't know everything that is out there, and everything that there is to know? Vastness is the root of most of my existential crisis'. I'm horrified by the size of the planet and the universe. I constantly feel so small in comparison to everyone else. I don't matter in the grand scheme of things. Even if I were to cure cancer, I feel like it wouldn't matter because I am so incredibly small.

There are five defined states of awe that are explained as such due to their containment of both vastness and accommodation; threat, beauty, ability, virtue, and supernatural casualty.⁹ Any moment that does not contain both ideas is said to be some other emotional experience because it cannot be classified as awe. True awe is a specific type of awe that especially encapsulates the ideas of vastness and accommodation. This moment of awe is undefinable. Apollo 9 astronaut Russell Schweickart said, "When you go around the Earth in an hour and a half, you begin to recognize that your identity is with that whole thing...That makes a change. You look down there and you can't imagine how many borders and boundaries you cross, again and again and again, and you don't even see them. There you are -- hundreds of people in the Mideast killing each other over some imaginary line that you're not even aware of, and that you can't see."¹⁰ This idea is almost alien to many. Those that put such heavy emphasis on borders and laws cannot open their mind to the fact that we as a people are a part of something much larger than those boundaries. We are so much larger than those human limitations. True awe is a feeling that amazes us and makes us question our existence. By seeing something so profound and beautiful, you realize that all the problems of the world don't even make sense. Why do we care about imaginary lines that dictate where countries start and stop? As humans, we desire to have something to call our own. Therefore we fight over the things that have been told are ours. Only those that have had that moment of epiphany can truly understand that none of that matters.

Being human comes with large limitations in our actions and even emotions. We can't fly, we are unable to hear or see things beyond a certain point, our bodies give out on us, we can't move very fast and we can only be so strong. And most importantly, we do not live forever. We as humans are limited by the idea of time (an idea that we created), stopping the amount of time we have before our work means nothing. Many great scientists, writers, and thinkers have worked their entire lives trying to prove some point only to be forgotten about mere weeks after their passing. Sooner or later someone else comes along and tries to solve that same question and the cycle continues. Although that is our reality, we must not acquire the mindset that nothing matters, because in fact, everything matters. As Sartre said, "No one can tell what the painting of tomorrow will be like." We cannot predict the future. We do not know what is coming. Therefore, we must take our lives one day at a time and not allow our existentialist ideas to get in the way of living. We must not allow others to fall behind in our ways of thinking where they give up on understanding our conditions. If they fall behind, we all do. We cannot act as if we are separate beings. We see superheroes and celebrities doing things that we cannot because we

⁹ Ibid, 304-305.

¹⁰ Real Clear Science. "Seeing earth from space; how true awe changes you."

are limited by our strength, wealth, and many other things. Although we have some form of resentment towards them for being able to do such things, we must remember that we are different and our lives are just as meaningful as theirs. We cannot compare ourselves to others because it only leads to self hate. We must live our lives one day at a time, not thinking about the ways that we are limited, but more about how we can use those limitations to improve the human experience.

We must accept the fact that there is no way to prove whether or not we are real. Often, the existential crisis leads to questioning whether or not anything is real. It's hard to imagine what it would be like if there were nothing. It wouldn't just be some large white or black expanse, there simply would be nothing. It's hard for humans to imagine a world without us because we know no other reality. Also, we are conceited and can't imagine things working without us. Then in the larger scheme of things, one thinks yet again about the vastness of the world. Without us, is there anything else that would not exist? It is physically impossible for us to wrap our heads around this idea, most likely because the idea is nothing. Humans find it difficult to think about a lack of existence. We need something to hold onto to tell us that we matter. If we think about nothing existing, then we feel as if we are insignificant. Are we real? We don't know. We can only assume that we are.

Descartes, one of the more modern existentialists along with others bring up the idea of the cogito, which is short for his saying "I think therefore I am." This saying ties into all branches of existentialism. It also relates to one of Sartre's biggest ideas of existentialism which is that we must exist before we figure out who we are or, "Existence precedes essence." Often, the idea of humanity becoming fully aware of their actions is brought about by existentialists. Those who can fully realize those actions are those who can create meaning and purpose for themselves. All of our actions have some sort of purpose. There is nothing in the world that was not done or does not exist for *some* reason. Many struggle with identity in the world and figuring out who they are and why they exist. Existentialism forces people to figure out everything about themselves for themselves. I think that I will not fully understand my life until I die. There is so much to comprehend and see, how can we say we know all there is to know about ourselves? The body is still a mystery to scientists and the brain is one of the most complicated systems that we are aware of. Life is all about figuring out things about yourself and learning about everything around you. According to existentialism, if I think I can become something, I will be able to.

Existentialism is often thought of as an ugly idea.¹¹ It is seen as something we shouldn't look too far into. The reason we don't study it as intensely as other subjects is because we are scared. We don't want to look into our purpose and existence because we are scared of what we will find. We are scared of the responsibility attached to realizing our purpose. We're scared of what we will then have to do. People are simply afraid to think about their existence and the fact that we die. Our fear of death has to do with the idea of us not existing. We don't like thinking about what things would be like if we didn't exist.

Existentialism is an idea meant to bring us into a state of crisis. It's scary and can make you feel as if your existence means nothing. When you feel like you are in that mindset, it is important to learn how to cope. Although coping is not a solution, it is a way of dealing with your emotions in a positive way.

¹¹ Sartre, Jean-Paul. "Existentialism is a Humanism."

How to deal with the limitations of the human condition, especially when in the state of crisis:

1. *Remember that you are human and must take care of yourself *even though* you see your impending death in the future.* Although we see this future, we are so much more than that eventual death. You must learn to take care of yourself even in the face of crisis.
2. *Do not get scared by the size of the universe; and don't try to wrap your head around it too much because you will most likely be unsuccessful.* The world is too big to even begin to understand. There are so many things happening at one time in our universe alone, it's impossible to imagine all of those further beyond, and to imagine where those societies are in their advancements and being. It's too much.
3. *Do not do things that are bad for your mental state ie; do not read things that will put you into a greater state of crisis when you are in the middle of an existential crisis.* It's like watching a horror movie at night when you're afraid of the dark; if you are in crisis, do not do things that will put you into the greater state of crisis.
4. *Do not do anything that is dangerous to your physical being.*
5. *Try to take advantage of all the opportunities you have because you will die someday. Remember that the world is beautiful. Go outside. Look around. Do not forget what is around you.* The world is too beautiful to sit inside all day. If you have the opportunity, travel, adventure, learn and see as much as you can. If you ignore what is around you, you will only miss out on the opportunity of seeing all there is to see.
6. *Do not say "nothing matters" because although it seems like that, everything matters.* Saying "nothing matters" is one of the most deprecating things one can say. You are acknowledging too greatly that you will die and you are small, but in order to live and function properly, you need to remember how unique and important you are. Thousands of things would be different if you didn't "matter".
7. *Do not push away the people you love because they matter and they are real.* If you do not accept those in your life as real beings, you will end up lonely someday because you did not take care of what you had.
8. *Remember, you are real.* Don't even begin to let the thought that humans aren't real enter your mind. We are all real. We would not be able to experience and feel as deeply as we do without this reality.
9. *But also take time to yourself because getting to know yourself is one of the hardest things in life.* Don't pass up the opportunity to meet yourself and learn everything there is to know about your body and mind. Absorb everything thrown at you. Feel everything too much and too little. Learn who you are and allow yourself to be human.

10. *Do not try to look too far into the future, live one day at a time.* The future is far away and scary. Do not try to figure it out--it will most likely not go well. Do not try to figure out the rest of your life when it is still ahead of you.

11. *You are real.*

I take things to heart and overthink everything. Studying existentialism is one of the best and worst things I have ever done for my mental state. It put me in the greatest crisis I have ever had, but also helped me understand more about my being than I ever thought was possible. We have ways to cope, we have knowledge on the subject, and through studying existentialism, I have realized that the meaning of life is simply to find meaning and purpose for yourself. All of these ideas together lead to the existential crisis and ourselves questioning our very existence. I thought that doing research on my existence and what leads to crisis would help me. I asked, "Does learning about the human condition help me understand my own existence and purpose? Or does it simply put me into a greater state of crisis." Unfortunately, it put me into a greater state of crisis. This is not, however, a negative thing. This crisis has made me want to learn more, read more, and write more. I have the desire to look into my existentialist thoughts and find out if others have had them. I have read *The Stranger*, and *Nausea* among other fictional and nonfiction pieces of work in order to understand the existential crisis of those in literature. I am learning more about myself and the world than I thought was possible. Through this research, I have decided to study philosophy in college and see where that takes me. I do not have my life figured out, but I know that I want to try things I never thought of before. I went into this inquiry thinking that I would find out why I have such consistent existential crisis. I know that it is because I question my existence instead of ignoring it. I think about the world and what has made me who I am as a person. I long to learn more and explore more and embrace my life more. I know that I am not small, I am just as big as every person in the world. My world may be the biggest thing I know, but I also understand that there is more out there than I am aware of.

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