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For Lack of a Better Word; A Person

Quilted cyanotype on cotton fabric

My piece explores my beliefs about the relationships between physical self, metaphysical self, energetic self, and art. I depicted the idea of consumption in my piece, taking common ways we consume every day and putting them into new contexts. My own personal beliefs around consumption and self shape this piece, however my goal was to make the viewer explore the work through the eyes of their own beliefs rather than trying to communicate mine.

I created a digital collage of what I wanted my final piece's imagery to be and then created blown up digital negatives. I used the negatives to print each panel of I then quilted the pieces together to create the components to the final piece.

A New Approach to Dualism



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OS47

Writer's Note: This paper explores different philosophies and beliefs about what makes up a human, what happens after we die, and what connects us to the rest of the universe. First we take a look into Mind-Body dualism, then Buddhist philosophy on the self, then finally, a look into my own personal beliefs and how these philosophies helped shape them.

Within a world of so many people and so many living things, I'm sure we've all thought about what it means to be a person or what it means to be alive. Why is it that we are able to be conscious of the decisions we're making, the things we're affecting, and the changes happening around us? Why are we the only living things who can grasp the concept of our own aliveness and mortality? These are questions that no one will ever entirely know the answer to but many try to explore and rationalize.

In the mid 17th century, the philosopher Rene Descartes came up with the concept of mind-body dualism. Mind body dualism is the idea that there are two categories that everything can fit into, physical and mental. Descartes believed that humans are both, hence dualism. A physical thing can be destroyed and the matter from it can be broken up and turned into something else, but a mental thing, such as a concept or something metaphysical, cannot be destroyed or dismantled (Keltz, 7).

A metaphysical concept is something like the color red. Red can manifest into physical objects like an apple. Let's say we have a red apple, if we then destroy the red apple so you can no longer tell that it was an apple or that it was red, that doesn't mean the concept of the color red does not exist. The color red can still manifest into other things even if it is not currently present in our world. On the flip side, if we destroy that apple, that apple will never exist again because the apple is a physical thing. There will be other apples, but not an apple grown from the same tree

on the same branch picked on the same day of the year with the same genetic makeup of that apple. This is the reasoning behind Descartes' concept. If our bodies are equivalent to the apple, then our minds are equivalent to the color red. Descartes believed that while you need mind and body to create a whole human, the mind would live on past the destruction and reconstitution of the human body (Byrne, 5).

This concept was soon accepted as the general norm because it fell in line with what major religions at the time were perpetuating. Within Catholicism and Christianity, it is the ultimate goal to be raised from the dead, have body reunited with mind, and live out the rest of existence in heaven (Keltz, 18). Assumably due to the churches of the time adapting and perpetuating the idea of mind-body dualism, it is still a very talked about and followed concept today whether or not it's explicitly known as mind-body dualism.

Long before mind-body dualism was even a whisper, in the east there was similar belief to it within Buddhist philosophy, however the distinction between mind and body is not as strong. For example, the sensation of feeling something physically is ultimately a mental sensation, but is translated through the physical body. The same can be said for feeling something mentally or emotionally, it is a mental sensation, but if you are feeling something very strongly, you can also feel it in your body (Lin, 241).

Buddhist philosophy follows the idea that rather than being dualistic, a human is composed of three parts, the mind, body, and consciousness. While these are three explicitly different parts, Buddhist philosophy explains them as three reeds standing and leaning on each other. They are not only interacting, but each one is necessary for each of the others to stay standing. This interaction and interdependence is what Buddhist philosophy believes creates a human.

While Buddhist philosophy on consciousness and self, and Descartes's theories on mind-body dualism don't entirely line up, the fact that these two incredibly influential philosophies came to such similar conclusions so far apart in both time and space must say something to the validity of these claims. Descartes believed that it was the distinction between mind and body that made a human, while buddhisim believes that it is the connection between all of the different parts that make a human rather than the human itself. The common factor here being that there are many parts and factors that go into humanity, but in some way or another everyone is looking for their own way to rationalize their own experiences and beliefs.

Diving deeper into these philosophies has helped me explore and give words to what I truly believe we are and how I believe we are connected to each other and the universe. Mind-body dualism started to make me think about what my body is and where it comes from. The more I thought about it the more I realized that I believe my body is just borrowed matter from the universe. Before it was my body it was something else and after I die it will eventually be reconstituted in some way and live on in someone else's story, creating a never ending loop of recycling matter and incorporating it into a new form. While this could be considered some form of physical reincarnation, I don't feel like I can claim ownership of my body because it is not ultimately me.

When exploring the idea of mind within mind-body dualism and Buddhist philosophy on the consciousness, I understood the separation of these things from the body logically, but personally it didn't make sense to me. Our minds and all of our thoughts, feelings, knowledge, and sense of consciousness are contained within our brain, a physical part of our body. If all of our thoughts are just neurons firing, and neurons are just a really small part of our body, then our thoughts are just a physical reaction within the body. This makes the distinction between mind and

body nonexistent within my beliefs, which is difficult to confront because that ultimately means that not only will your body die but your mind will die with it. This also means that our thoughts and opinions and reactions are as much ours as our body ours. For a short period of time we contain, create, and embody our thoughts and feelings, but once we die, everything we haven't put out into the world for others to interact with dies with us.

I believe the great majority of what we consider ourselves to be dies and doesn't continue to be us once our time is up, however I do also believe there is more to us than the body. Everything in the universe has been created in some sense of the word by energy, and since energy can neither be created nor destroyed, our energy will never die. Similar to mind-body dualism I believe there are two ways your energy lives on.

The first kind of energy is physical energy. Similar to the idea of physical reincarnation, the decomposition of a body and reconstitution of the flesh into other organic matter is the movement of energy from one body to another. If a bear spends all its life eating and then dies, the energy that he consumed from the food he ate will then be passed on to whatever consumes him, whether it's another animal or a plant absorbing the energy through carbon in the soil.

The second kind of energy is more conceptual and harder to explain. It is the energy that I believe to be equivalent to the idea of a soul or aura, an energy that feeds off of creativity and connection and is the drive behind everything and everyone. I think of it as a ball at the very center of a physical form. By being in proximity to other people, you can absorb their energy as a part of your own and vice versa like a snowball growing bigger and bigger. Some people's snowballs are very large and touch many people, while others are harder to connect with and absorb. When you create something in the physical world, you put a piece of that energy into the physical thing, whether it's a lasagna or a painting. When others interact or engage with what you've made it

gives them a piece of your energy whether or not you're there. They can choose whether or not to take it with them and add it to their snowball or to leave the energy with the physical thing. If they take the energy you put into that thing, they leave a small piece of themselves with it, ultimately changing and influencing what you've made, even just a miniscule amount.

The energy within everyone is the culmination of all of the things they find most significant and valuable about life. The snowball that absorbs all of the energy around you is ultimately yours so it is up to you what you perpetuate through what you're putting into the world. You can change and shape the energy you're absorbing and then energy you're perpetuating by using the energy you already have.

When I was about nine years old, my mother was diagnosed with cancer. After many months of doctors appointments, and treatments, and surgeries, and physical therapies, she seemed exhausted. This is about the time when she took me to one of her appointments with a woman who specialized in acupuncture, yoga, and reiki healing. I walked into this house that smelled heavily of patchouli and incense, the walls were painted red and there were at least three lamps in every room. I was incredibly skeptical of the wild haired woman in front of me, but my mom seemed to trust her wholeheartedly. She asked my mom to lay on her back on a yoga mat, lit even more incense, and started putting her hands very close to my mothers forehead. I was confused and didn't believe that this could be considered healing in any way, but the woman beckoned me over and started to show me what she was doing. She told me to clap my hands together really hard, and then hold them close to each other. It felt tingly and warm. She explained that clapping requires energy and once you call it up to your hands you can feel the energy that flows through you.

The idea behind reiki healing is that you are able to share energy with someone, simply by picturing the energy traveling from you to them. The way this woman taught me was by picturing

your arms as straws. You push the energy through your arms the same way you push air through a straw when you're blowing bubbles into milk. By making your snowball as blank and uninfluenced as possible and sharing that energy, you can help someone regain and regrow their snowball. At first I was skeptical, but soon I could feel a tingly sensation flowing through me and I felt my hands get warm.

There is very little known about how reiki actually works. Many studies have been done about reiki, including the effects on those going through chemo and dementia, but the most explicitly telling and undeniable evidence was a thermal reading from the early 90s of someone doing reiki. It showed a temperature change in someone's hand while they were performing reiki out of the palm (Bourne, 12). Unfortunately it is not known the exact temperature difference because the method of measurement used was Kirlian photography, however it is enough to visibly see a difference from before the practitioner started performing to act, to once they had been doing so for a number of minutes.

Our bodies are like translators for energy. Reiki being a very literal example of this, the bodies connection to one another allows the conceptual energy to pass back and forth. Food is another example, our body takes a physical thing, and translates it into energy, fueling us with that physical energy. Even art, our bodies allow us to visually see, physically interact with, and conceptually understand art, in order to absorb the energy and meaning that the artist put into it. The universe is lending you a physical form in order for you to connect with other energetic beings through the physical form that they are being lent.

I personally don't believe that mind-body dualism is the only explanation for what we are and what will happen once we die, but exploring it helped me find my own beliefs and my own philosophy. Energy dualism feels like a fitting phrase that synthesizes the idea of a physical body,

a physical form of energy, and an entirely conceptual form of connective energy. Ultimately, the thing that I'm taking away from all of these philosophies and beliefs is that no one will ever truly know any of what's going to happen, until it happens to them, and like energy, it's important to constantly be growing and changing and absorbing, because you can only ever live in the moment.

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