

Fancy G.

Dallas, Texas

The Echo of Someone Else's Music

Plaster, Fiberglass, Paper, Ink, Lino

“To influence a person is to give him one’s own soul. He does not think his natural thoughts or burn with his natural passions. His virtues are not real to him. His sins, if there are such things as sins, are borrowed. He becomes an echo of someone else’s music, an actor of a part that has not been written for him.” Oscar Wilde wrote this as a lesson to Dorian Gray, but also as a reflection of the world. Every person is merely an echo of everyone else’s music. This piece, while representative of me and moments in my life, is simultaneously a reflection of everyone I have ever met. Every interaction, every conversation, and every observation has shaped me into the person I am and will continue to shape me into the person I will become. The prints represent how people evolve. Every moment, every day, and every year add a line. As you age, all of your experiences take shape and form a clearer and clearer image of who you are. However, to grow as a person you must also shake away aspects of your past self. The plaster casts represent someone emerging from what they used to be. While the process of creating this art was difficult, making sure every detail mattered to what I was trying to convey was even more taxing. I wanted each position, each line, and each individual choice I made to matter. What I hope you take away from this piece is that every choice you make is a culmination of everything you have ever learned from anyone you have ever met, and that choice in turn will affect people to the same capacity.

Am I a Sinner?



Fancy G.

The Oxbow School

OS49

Writer's Note: Am I a good person? God, can you hear me when I ask you if I'll make it into heaven? This project is more for me than anyone else. It is not meant to answer the question of what is moral. I will not ever, no matter how many books I read or hours I research, know the answer. This piece is an examination of the importance of perspective, thought, and intention in relation to morality. I hope it leaves you with questions, but I hope you also know those questions may be unanswerable. Unanswerable questions are the best kind. They force us to think past what we know and into what we believe.

I. The Power of Thought

As the world evolves, the gray area thickens. Right and wrong differ depending on perspective, and universal law only becomes more haphazard. Sin, in modern terms, is not easily defined. In general terms, it is an immoral act against ethical or religious law.¹ From a religious lens, sin is action, not intent.² However, from an ethical lens, sin is the opposite. It is the thought behind an action that distinguishes it as good or bad. Modern sin is immorality. Modern sin is bad intention. Intention is something often overlooked but always present. Across history and government, the potency of the mind has been proven time and time again. As thoughts become more and more powerful in regard to action and attitude, a person is no longer good because of what they do, but what they believe in.

In 1946 America, uncertainty plagued the public. The Cold War was an arms race and power struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union. But unlike previous wars, it was a war of intention, not action.³ Intention and potential became so potent that they created conflict

¹ Paulson, Ronald. *Sin and Evil: Moral Values in Literature*. Yale UP, 2007.

² Baker, Lisa Loraine. "What Is Sin?" Christianity.com, 7 Sept. 2023, www.christianity.com/wiki/sin/what-is-sin.html. Accessed 3 Dec. 2023.

³ Cleveland, Harlan. "The Cold War." U.S. Foreign Affairs Research, 21 Oct. 2006. National Archives, www.archives.gov/research/foreign-policy/cold-war/symposium/cleveland.html. Accessed 30 Nov. 2023.

that spanned decades. Because there were no direct battles or formal declaration of war, most of the hardships occurred domestically. American citizens were thrown into cells for their ideology, or even just speculation of such. This pure fear of communists was called the Red Scare. People watched their neighbors as if they were on the front lines. Americans began to fear for their lives on two fronts. They feared the Soviets potential possession of nuclear weapons, but also the potential domestic takeover by communism. This war is an important example of the potency of the mind. Thoughts had more gravity than widely anticipated. Two global powers held so much influence over each other that words alone caused a war.

The power of words on this planet is enigmatic. Words have impacts on our minds, and subsequently our actions and lives. Stories alone are able to create entire ideologies which can govern societies. Almost two centuries ago, the church had a major role in politics. It coexisted in the government until church and state separated for good. Even after the separation, religious beliefs continue to make their way into the political landscape.⁴ Religion is not fact and therefore cannot be universal. Religion was born of words, and religion carries on through pure faith and belief.⁵ The politicization of religion by tying it to government proves two things: the power of words and the power of belief. Stories became so widely known that they were considered fact, and the pure faith people had in these stories became sought after by the government. When church and state combined, fact and myth combined as well. Even as global governments stray from religious principles, religious concepts and values make their way into our everyday life. The importance of religion to society reflects the power of belief.

⁴ Calhoun, Samuel W. "If Separation of Church and State Doesn't Demand Separating Religion from Politics, Does Christian Doctrine Require It?" School of Law, 2018. Washington and Lee, scholarlycommons.law.wlu.edu/wlulr-online/vol74/iss2/15/. Accessed 30 Nov. 2023.

⁵ Schilbrack, Kevin. "The Concept of Religion." Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Summer, 2022 ed., 28 Mar. 2022, plato.stanford.edu/entries/concept-religion/. Accessed 3 Dec. 2023.

If intention makes us good, what leads us to have those intentions? The short answer is belief and experience. Where you come from, who you speak to, and what you see leads you to believe certain choices are right or wrong. Individual opinions of right and wrong, or moral compasses, are unique to each person based on their perception of the people around them. This means that no decision is ever truly made by an individual. It is influenced by everything around them, spreading blame or recognition. Even in a court of law, understanding what influenced a decision matters immensely. *Mens Rea* is a term in criminal law that explains the intention or knowledge of wrongdoing.⁶ It acknowledges the importance of thoughts and motive in a courtroom, and how judging a person based solely on their actions without considering reason is not fair. Factors like exhaustion, depression, anxiety, or other mental health disorders can lead the mind to make uninformed decisions.⁷ If someone is out of their right mind when committing a crime, they can plead insane. When someone does plead insane, it means they are pleading not guilty. The insanity plea completely removes the defendant from the crime, and if insanity can be proven they face no punishment.⁸ State of mind when a decision is made can completely change the meaning of the action. Action does not define whether a person is good or bad, guilty or not guilty.

From belief to intention to thoughts and words, the mind creates constructs to explain and understand the world around us. The human mind craves omnipotence and assurance. It wants to know as much as it can, and when it cannot know something instinct drives it to create a reason. Religion was born of this instinct. It is never certain that a certain lifestyle on earth merits something in the afterlife. But when someone dies, life carries on without them. Humans have

⁶ Szasz, Thomas. *Insanity: The Idea and Its Consequences*. John Wiley and Sons.

⁷ Schaffner, Anna Katharina. *Exhaustion: A History*. Columbia UP, 2016.

⁸ "What Is an Insanity Plea?" Hester Law Group, 3 Jan. 2022, www.hesterlawgroup.com/blog/2022/january/what-is-an-insanity-plea-/. Accessed 1 Dec. 2023.

meaning on earth before they die, but that meaning also extends past their life onto those they have affected.

II. What Does It Mean to Have Meaning?

What is truly fascinating about the mind is the uncontested power it has over the body. It commands us in thought and action. And yet, the only way the mind has thought to represent itself to other minds is through words. The best way for one to understand another is through a translation of letters. Many classic authors, like Sylvia Plath or Oscar Wilde, became famous for their talents in translation of human emotion onto paper. While being entertaining certainly helped, the true allure to their stories is the window into the personal experience of the author. Between Plath and Wilde, many common themes stuck out to me across their poetry and writing. However, only one stuck with me: Legacy. In both *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Colossus*, death is represented through art. Tangible items tie a soul to earth. These texts made me wonder what death meant, and how death affects life. But then I kept wondering. All of a sudden, it was all I could do. Research had presented me with endless unanswerable questions.

III. Unanswerable Questions

In 1907, Doctor Duncan MacDougall discovered that a body loses twenty-one grams after dying.⁹ Twenty-one measly grams is all the soul is worth.

All of the agony my mind put itself through

amounts to the same weight as a small mouse.

All of the joy and laughter and sadness and tears

⁹ SOUL HAS WEIGHT, PHYSICIAN THINKS; Dr. Macdougall of Haverhill Tells of Experiments at Death. LOSS TO BODY RECORDED Scales Showed an Ounce Gone in One Case, He Says -- Four Other Doctors Present." The New York Times, 11 Mar. 1907.

amount to eighteen jellybeans

or four credit cards

or two triple A batteries.

Did I endure all of this for twenty-one grams?

Or is twenty-one grams the weight of the key

That unlocks the gates of heaven

Am I a sinner?

When the anxiety poisoning my mind spread throughout my body

My nails digging marks in my palm

My stomach mixing, its contents turning like cement in a truck

My words spewing out like darts, my target the hearts of the ones I love

Did I sin when I yelled at them?

When I ignored their kind words, rolling off my back like raindrops

Did I sin when I murdered the love in my life?

Am I a sinner?

When I stare and criticize and hate

Even if I am staring at a mirror

I became the person I hate the most,

The only person I truly hate at all.

Does that hatred condemn me?

Will I see my reflection in the gold gates as they close on me?

The future looms like a malignant force

The shadow it casts leaves my mind surrounded by uncertainty

I wonder about who I am

How people perceive me

How God perceives me

If He even exists.

Will He care that I stopped going to church?

Or that even when I did

It happened to fall on the days with free donuts

Will God mind that I only pray to Him when I am afraid that He is real?

Will heaven reject me because I couldn't have full faith in a myth?

God made me like this

He must have.

It can't be my fault when I wake up feeling meaningless

Not like I want to die, but not like I see the point in living either.

God made me like this

He must have

It can't be my fault that my stomach churns when an unfamiliar face walks in the room

Knowing in my mind that they are harmless, but in my heart they hate me

God made me like this

He must have

Why else would I have a birthmark on one forearm and scars on the other

Will they let a broken mind past the pearly gates? Even if it was broken from the beginning?
Or will I fall another nine circles beneath six feet.

Do good people exist?

The scale tips

One way or the other

But there is always weight on both sides.

Am I a good person

Because I did something nice

Or a bad person

Because I did it to look nicer

Am I a bad person

Because I said something cruel

Or a good person

Because I held back something crueler

Is God real?

Did He hear me all the times I prayed

Head glued to the pillow

Eyelids scrunched so tight my head began to pound.

Did he hear the thoughts that rattled in my skull

As I addressed Him

“God, if you can hear me,

Please don't let me die disappointed.

If you can hear me, just make my life worth it.”

Did He watch me fall asleep with my palms pressed together over my chest?

Was He still listening when I thought

“He probably isn't even real.”

Don't mistake the pain of today for the promise of tomorrow.

Because tomorrow owes you nothing.

Don't survive now for happiness in a few decades

Because you may only make it one more

How will I be remembered?

Will they cast me in bronze

Or give me one hundred words in the local paper.

IV. Am I A Sinner?

No one is a sinner. That would imply a singular purpose or meaning to their life. Every life is a myriad of decisions, emotions, and experiences. The only concrete finding of my research is that the human mind is unexplainable. It can never be collectively defined because it is not a collective. We have turned initially insignificant words and emotions into conflict or doctrine that spans the entire planet just by finding commonality in them. However, no matter how miraculous the human brain is, it will never be able to answer all of the questions. There is always something left unanswered, and sometimes unanswered questions are the foundation of something prodigious.

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