

ILS

Exploring the Self Through Purpose

Humans have sought to find the answer to the nature of existence since our minds first evolved. The effort to discover our 'selves' is ultimately aimed at answering the parallel question of what the purpose of human life is. The human capacity for reason makes us yearn for purpose. As thinkers, humans require ideological structures to make sense of our bizarre and precarious condition. Our attempts to create these mental support structures take the form of philosophy, religion, and artistic expression. In our search for meaning, a study of the human soul and its relationship to our everyday bodies becomes necessary. While the Classical beliefs of Plato establish an immortal soul that rests separate from our bodies, Humanist philosophy arising in the Renaissance, and continuing in the Romantic movement, combine the human body and soul and place it within our natural world.

At the end of Plato's dialogue *Phaedrus*, Socrates presents an analogy to represent the human self. The charioteer is a stand in for the reason and intellect that occupies the helm of our soul. The charioteer guides its two horses that represent morality and appetite respectively. Plato's contentions rely on the belief in an immortal soul that transcends physical existence. Our body and soul happen to be trapped together in our world but ultimately they are separate entities. In fact, according to Plato our souls rightfully belong to the realm of forms and are imprisoned by the paradoxical blindness of our physical senses. While this separation of body and spirit inspired new religious doctrine in the hands of Saint Augustine, from a modern and even personal perspective, I have difficulty separating my inner self, or soul, from my body.

The importance of our material existence began to catch up with spiritual existence centuries later during the Renaissance movement when humanist ideas were introduced into Platonic philosophy. While the Italian Renaissance philosopher Pico della Mirandola maintained the immortality of the soul, his philosophy granted humanity the ability to change themselves and seek the divine. To do so, humans are required to improve upon their natural place through study and practice. Pico assumes a sense of human exceptionalism to enable our power to ascend in the great chain of being. According to Pico, neither angel nor beast has this marvelous ability. The idea of the great chain also seems flawed, however, because of its arbitrary and self-serving structure. There is so far no solid scientific basis that humans are any less animal than the rest of Earth's creatures. As evolutionary biologist Sean Nee describes, humans possess "A deep psychological need to see ourselves as the culmination of creation." Once again, in the Western tradition, I believe our desire to be set apart from nature comes from that same desire for purpose which started the search for our identity. In other animals we observe, purpose is generally limited to survival and reproduction. Humans tend to separate themselves from animals because we believe there must be more to our lives than just those basic biological purposes.

Proceeding Pico in the Renaissance, Michel de Montaigne continues to celebrate the human condition but turns away from the idea of the immortal soul and the great chain of being. Montaigne breaks the chain and concludes that humans are not fallen angels held back by our physical condition. Our 'selves' are a combination of our physical bodies and the fragile spirit of life. By understanding our physical human condition, we can discover ourselves. Montaigne advises us to enjoy our successes and, more importantly, be at peace with our shortcomings.

While Montaigne is clearly not a Romantic, his emphasis on human experience is similar to the philosophies that I experienced in Wordsworth and Rousseau. Introspection and isolation within our nature stand out as the key to mental and physical peace. Broadly, the focus has shifted from an outward struggle to rise in the great chain of being to an inward search for self understanding.

Rather than trying to flee our ties to the physical world by ascending above animals towards the divine as Plato and Pico suggest, I am inclined to look towards my current world. Completely rejecting human exceptionalism is exceedingly difficult. A good first step would be to look inward and understand our own condition before reaching outwards to our imagined heights. In our constant search for purpose, perspective and introspection should be our guides.