

[Essay]

A Brief Passage Through the Wilderness

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Abstract

Human life is a relatively brief passage through the wilderness. This passage is filled with countless untold stories that are intertwined in an unbroken chain of generations and eras. These forgotten lives and stories in an indifferent and unforgiving world are vital elements of history that have led humanity to the present. However, relatively few individuals are remembered through the generations; most humans fade into the background of history.

Human life is a brief passage through a largely unknown world. Lasting a few tens of thousands of Earth days, human life is relatively brief in cosmic terms. It is a challenging crossing without direction through the unforgiving terrain of the wilderness, and without Moses and the Promised Land. Life is also a series of random moments with probabilistic outcomes, which are intertwined with other random moments and evolve into a human story of struggle and survival. In the uncertain chain of life, each moment could be the last due to the random nature of events and survival. From the beginning of human cognition, it must have been both mystifying and terrifying to experience this strange world full of unfamiliar things and surroundings.

Human history is filled with untold stories of survival, hunger, war, death, migration, uncertainty, fear, loneliness, despair, hope, curiosity and discovery. A common recurring theme has always been survival, which is rarely graceful. So many generations and individuals have gone through these experiences, and so many of their stories are lost forever with them in the immeasurable silence.

No one knows for certain about the origins of life. There are various religious accounts of creation, as well as scientific explanations based on biochemical processes involving molecular interactions under favorable energetic conditions, leading to transition of non-living molecules to living biological cells. However, all of the explanations remain controversial.

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Life is a chaotic process in which some small and seemingly inconsequential actions of an individual and others can cause a series of ripple effects in one's life. The world is a dynamic system full of a myriad of entangled processes and events and outcomes that are beyond anyone's control. Every step and every moment is affected by numerous factors that randomize the original plan behind each step. Thus, human beings are faced with troubling uncertainty against the background of a constantly changing world.

Throughout the centuries, countless individuals navigated deserts and rivers and seas and mountains, while trying to survive in the unforgiving wilderness. They rose above their origins and developed tools and composed music and walked on the moon and mapped the human genome. However, the ingenious but limited human mind has been also prone to irrationality and cognitive biases, as it struggles to understand the world and to touch the unknowable.

During their evolution, humans developed language and cognitive skills, and became self-aware. With the rise of cognition, they have also developed imagination and abstract reasoning, which are vital for constructing various models of the world. Many concepts, which are formed in an effort to explain the universe, typically shape and limit human perceptions and understanding of reality. However, these concepts do not exist in nature; they only exist in human minds. Thus, they are constrained by cognitive limits, and they are always partial and provisional. These constraints establish limits to human understanding of the world.

Language confines the mind within its structure and limits. To navigate through the complexities of reality, the human mind constructs categories and concepts, which represent only fragments of reality. These categories and concepts, which become ingrained in the language and views of reality, relate mostly to classical Newtonian reality that maintains a strong grip on the human mind, and thus limits human thought and understanding. The human mind and senses have evolved to perceive and conceive this classical reality, and therefore one has to use imagination and scientific concepts for accessing reality beyond the classical limit. The problem is the mind's inability to access reality directly, without mediation or distortion by language, thoughts, concepts, or context. Although it appears that a human observer experiences a complete reality, in fact it is a distorted representation of a fraction of reality in the mind.

A clear definition of things is critical to avoid ambiguity. However, the act of defining establishes conceptual boundaries and limits on thoughts, words and

things. Thus reality, which is fragmented into discrete objects and properties and concepts, becomes an experiential illusion influenced by distorted perceptions of these fragments. Although definitions are necessary to establish the framework for analysis and interpretation, and to sort out the chaos of information and perceptions, this process of defining also creates separation between objects that becomes entrenched in the mind. Thus, the human mind divides the world into separate elements or categories that are assigned with certain attributes that may not correspond to reality.

The coexistence and cooperation between individuals in a society eventually led to the formation of nations and the introduction of money and laws, which are human inventions rather than elements of reality. The accumulation of money and wealth, and the associated greed, although having no intrinsic value but a means of survival, became one of the main driving forces in life. These can alleviate the challenges of survival, but they do not always bring existential security and contentment in life.

The fragility of human life is inescapable, as an individual is thrust into the Darwinian world of survival, accompanied by the unyielding presence of death and one's equally relentless denial of it. As individuals are mostly driven by the primal instinct to survive the labyrinth of life, such an existence would be unbearable without illusions and beliefs, which provide the necessary antidotes for the uncertainties of life in a world full of random events. These illusions are often more appealing than the harsh realities of a world in which life is ruled by chance. Thus, each individual exists on two levels; one level is that of illusions and the other is that of the practical world of daily life. The prevalence of illusions in life indicates that they are vital to human well-being. However, illusions can also lead to errors in judgment, since they can reduce the human capacity to see things as they are.

In order to cope with life and make it more endurable, the human tendency is to escape present reality by creating an alternate reality that offers solace and refuge from the world. Some people escape into the past and some into the future, and others try to escape the present through arts and entertainment and various types of explorations.

In the presence of limits to the understanding of the world, humans have been using their imagination to construct myths and narratives about themselves and the universe. However, imagination can also lead to illusions. Thus, the concept of God was invented by the human mind. This concept offers hope in

this life and the next; and although illusory, it also provides support to go on with life in the inhospitable wilderness. However, concepts and beliefs tend to confine the human mind. The dilemma is that the more one relies on them, the more one views reality through the prism of these concepts and theories, and the more one becomes captive to them. It is difficult to part with these concepts, since without them one's entire foundation and worldview may collapse.

The development of the concept of God has created one of the greatest dilemmas of human life, or one of its greatest tragedies. It is not that the human longing for God is never fulfilled, or that one can become attached to certain ideas and be constrained by them, but how easily one can be blinded by belief in an illusory supernatural ruler invented by the ruled.

Humans desire certainty and structure in their lives. They also seek simple and definitive answers to the complex questions. Religion, which tries to satisfy the longing for answers to questions that are beyond human understanding, offers absolute certainties and answers to every imaginable question. It also offers the permanence of truth, irrespective of all the changes in the world, and thus provides the illusion of certainty in an uncertain world. In addition, religion maintains a comforting belief in the centrality and celestial destiny of humanity, which provides a reassuring antidote to despair, death and oblivion.

In the absence of any other doctrine that offers certainty during uncertain times and personal difficulties, the concept of God provides solace and hope. But hope is a construct of the human mind; it is an illusion, which can result in disappointments. The biggest difficulty with any dogma or undisputed faith is that they would require surrendering the free exchange of ideas. As the result, there would be no freedom of inquiry. No theory, worldview or teaching of any kind, whether scientific or religious should be accepted as final, or as dogma, as this can hinder further understanding of the universe.

The emergence of human self-awareness and the ability to reason are both a gift and a burden. These cognitive functions provide humans with skills of survival, but they also lead to ego development and sense of mortality, which catalyze thoughts about life and the universe, and about the seeming futility of the individual's efforts. An excessive attachment to self and ego can result in the distortion of perceived reality and detachment from the world. An unchecked ego is one of the major causes of suffering. This is especially pronounced when the ego is not commensurate with one's desires and abilities, and when it is not acknowledged. The desires are endless, but most of them cannot be fulfilled, and

all that can be achieved is only partial and temporary. Early humans did not have the luxury to desire much but to survive in their inhospitable environment.

Self-awareness also leads to self-related biases, which have a strong influence on judgment. One example is the self-serving bias, which is the tendency to judge success and failure in terms of personal benefit or enhancement, so that to maintain a positive view of the self. There are also other cognitive biases, which are caused by limitations in memory, perception, and thinking, leading to errors in judgment. Some of these include confirmation bias, illusion of control, mere exposure effect, and subjective validation. The inherent self-interest and cognitive biases make it difficult to distinguish between actual events and their biased interpretations. This may diminish the ability to think clearly in order to anticipate and adapt to future changes and challenges.

There is constant presence of uncertainty about the purpose of the universe and the meaning of life. The human existence is constrained by the laws of nature, as well as by the finite capacity of the human mind. One cannot change the basic laws of nature, or the form and structure of reality. The only solace is to find some measure of meaning in life; and although it may be fruitless to search for the purpose of the universe, one may discover some islands of meaning within the knowable universe.

The most tangible significance of human life is to strive to comprehend the nature of reality and imbue it with some purpose and meaning, with each individual adding their own interpretation of life. However, most of the individual stories are never told or remembered, as they get lost in the flow of history and its voices, like individual water molecules in ocean waves. In the end, each life dissolves into fragmented memories that are lost in the background noise of history. In this brief and uncertain life, which is constrained by the limits of knowledge and understanding, humans have to understand and endure not only the outer world, but also the complex inner world of the mind full of unresolved thoughts and illusions. They must also search for some measure of meaning in a seemingly meaningless world.

The reality of the human condition during the past thousands of years has been hardly conducive to a long and happy life, as an individual emerges briefly into the world during a specific era and in a specific place, and disappears into the unknown. Each of the lives is determined by a specific period of history and builds on a specific understanding of the world. Thus, each individual is influenced and defined by the times and conditions in which one lives.

The limited human senses and scientific tools allow only an incomplete perception of reality. The dilemma of capturing objective reality is that it is perceived through subjective sense impressions that generate distorted internal representations of the external world in the mind, which are subsequently interpreted as objective reality. The limited human mind can only grasp elements of reality that are interpreted using partial and tentative concepts and theories, which both guide and constrain one's interpretation and understanding of reality. Thus, human knowledge and understanding always remain incomplete and provisional; and most of the thinking relates to this incomplete and distorted representation of reality in the mind that constructs its own reality. Doubt and uncertainty are always present in human thinking. The problem of capturing reality is that human knowledge not only remains incomplete and provisional, but it is also often illusory. One of the biggest dilemmas of human understanding of reality is an involuntary acceptance of the necessity to live with what is perceived as truth at the time, knowing that this truth will evolve with additional knowledge and better understanding.

To some extent, human life resembles a theatrical performance with no distinction between actors and spectators, who are constantly searching for their roles and voices. Much effort is exerted in designing costumes and masks, but very few know the script. The human ego is the central theme of the drama, as actors are constantly seeking validation from spectators and each other.

If the world is indeed a stage, then it often appears that the play was written in haste, and the cast is constantly changing. If life were a painting, it would be an abstract composition on the canvas of illusory time; if life were music, it would sound like a series of whispers in the desert; and if life were an enigma, it would be understood by its relation to the unknown and unknowable. In this life, every individual is in a constant struggle between darkness and light, and between despair and hope, and between illusion and reality.

Every generation has its heroes and villains, and the struggle between good and bad has always been uneven. The good has always been surviving against the odds, rather than the good overcoming the bad. In the struggle for survival in a world of relativistic values and morality, villains do not typically perceive themselves as bad individuals, as their rationalizations are endless and as they consider their actions as justified in the context of survival. In the world of limited resources, human nature of self-preservation and the pursuit of unlimited desires can lead to actions that could infringe on the rights and freedoms of

others. In this context, there are two types of people: those who lighten the burden of life for others and those who worsen it.

One of the hardest revelations at the end of life is the realization that different realities constructed in individual human minds are largely illusory and that most things in life are not important at all. Those very few things that are important, based on each individual's perspective, are usually recognized too late in life, when they are of little use.

Throughout their struggles, humans have been continuously trying to impose some order and certainty on their lives through religious dogmas and practices, or through certain cultural and social norms, or through scientific understanding of the world. The desire for social order in society provides the motivation for the emergence of various types of authoritarian demagogues and opportunists who try to advance their own interests rather than those of society as a whole.

The pictures of Earth taken from outer space illustrate the fragility of the biosphere, existing in a delicate balance against the background of the darkness of space. The vital question is whether this balance will continue for the foreseeable future. Another question is whether humans will survive in their current form or will transform into cyborgs (part organic and part machine), and eventually into posthumans. It is likely that humans will strive to move beyond the constraints of their fragile biology. The issues of concern relate to the nature of identity, the nature of society, the limits of human enhancement, and the loss of individuality. Irrespective of these concerns, humans are not satisfied with being born into fleeting existence, but try to control their destiny by self-directed evolution. The crucial question is whether technological advances will save humanity or lead to its eventual extinction.

With time, most things, including memories and thoughts and feelings, fade away at different rates. Some things survive change for some period, but ultimately all things must come to an end in the universe governed by the law of entropy. The only consolation of human life is in trying to capture every fleeting moment and find the value in it.

What emerges following a brief passage through the wilderness? What remains of the struggle to reach the unknowable? What is revealed when empty rhetoric and words become meaningless, and the only consolation is silence? How does one reconcile with the absurd life filled with illusions and longing for the unknowable within the emerging universe of probabilities? The two possible responses are to keep asking questions that may not have clear answers and to

unquestionably accept vague answers; the first is the domain of science and the second is the realm of religion.

The goal of science is to discover and describe objective reality. However, the scientific description of reality is limited by incomplete theories, the underlying foundation of which is the unknowable and indefinable ultimate reality. In this context, the fundamental difference between science and faith is that science is concerned with the knowable and is based on evidence, whereas faith requires belief in the unknowable without evidence. Religion is based on unverifiable beliefs related not to reality itself, but what it is supposed to be according to God's design. Science, committed to open-ended inquiry, unites people in common understanding of the universe, whereas various religions inhibit free thinking and often divide people. In the end, what emerges in the quest for truth is the invisible wall of the unknown and unknowable; this barrier arises due to limited cognition, language, concepts and understanding.

At the wall of the unknown and unknowable, philosophers and scientists and theologians debate what is fundamental and what is emergent, and whether there is any purpose to life and the universe. At the wall, there are also countless individuals hidden in the shadows and fog of history and memory. They are in awe of the human capacity to comprehend the world, but remain mindful of the limits of human cognition and knowledge. The fundamental questions, such as why there is something rather than nothing and what is the ultimate purpose of the universe and what is the meaning of human life, remain unanswered. In the end, an individual never reaches the necessary depth of understanding of the true meaning of life and truth about the universe; and what remains of life is only debris from past experiences and their interpretations that do not complete the puzzle of life.

Most individuals who have ever lived are unknown. Only some voices reverberate in memory through the generations. In the timeless universe, among the remembered who gather at the wall are Aristotle and Kant, discussing with Spinoza and Einstein the nature of reality and human life, and Beckett and Camus reflecting on the absurdity of life. At dusk, both the forgotten and the remembered fall silent in expectation of some sign or revelation that may never come, and they will be waiting at the wall the next day and the next one and the next.