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How Fundamental Epistemic Limitation Impacts My Human Experience

Matthew McNairy

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Honors Thesis

HOW FUNDAMENTAL EPISTEMIC LIMITATION
IMPACTS MY HUMAN EXPERIENCE

by
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ABSTRACT

HOW FUNDAMENTAL EPISTEMIC LIMITATION IMPACTS MY HUMAN EXPERIENCE

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My thesis examines different ways that I am ignorant through a philosophical lens. Through examining my ignorance, I gain insight into myself and the world. However, the kinds of ignorance that interest and irk me the most are fundamental to life. I explore two major sources of ignorance and reference many more. The first source of ignorance is myself. Myself includes my body, my emotions, and my actions. I can partially control each of these, but I also do not fully understand them. I explore who I am as a self and what my moral responsibility is in the context of self-ignorance. The second source of ignorance is other people. I have moderate access to my own mind, but the minds of others are separated from me by a gulf. Yet, I desperately need other people. I explore how I can understand other people and overcome coordination problems despite the distance between myself and others.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Title.....	i
Abstract.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	v
I. On the Unity of the Soul.....	1
II. On the Existence of Other Minds.....	19
Works Cited.....	33

On the Unity of the Soul

When I try to remember my past, I don't remember being small. In those days, doorways towered over me, hallways extended for miles, and rooms contained hidden wonders. Today, doorways, hallways, and rooms fit me just right. I do not recall a gradual change in me or in the size of architecture. I assume that I gradually grew as most people do, but trying to trace the path from my distant memories to my current ones brings me to a gulf of forgetfulness. I remember the far past and the near past. The moderate past escapes my recollection. In addition, my distant memories don't feel familiar in the way my current memories do. I know where I move my hand even if my eyes are closed by proprioception. More than that, I feel that the hand belongs to me. My current memories feel like they are mine in a similar way. My distant memories feel alien. Those memories may not be mine at all. Perhaps they belong to some other smaller person. Even if that smaller person is me in some sense, they no longer feel like me. Maybe I became a different person since elementary school or have been several people since then.

Many people say who I am now is all that matters. I admit they have a point. The past is locked away, barring time turners and infinite gravity wells. Why should I worry about the past? One reason is because the past preceded the present. Leibniz claimed that everything has a cause (5). I intuitively agree with Leibniz and a likely candidate for the cause of the present is the past. However, if the past causes the present then the past determines the present. For example, assume the past before December 25, 1775, caused George Washington to cross the Delaware at night and ambush the mercenaries at Trenton. If this is true, then George Washington could not have taken any other action

then the actions he took, because he was not the cause of his actions. This view that the past causes the present is called determinism. According to determinism the past and future are equally fixed. Only our lack of knowledge hides them from us. A French mathematician named Pierre Simon Marquis de Laplace imagined a being who had perfect understanding of the location and momentum of every particle in the universe. Based on Newtonian physics, this being would perfectly understand the past and future. If determinism is true, then such a knowledge is theoretically possible (de Laplace 4). I am not surprised this being was called Laplace's Demon. Modern physics has shown that to know the exact location and momentum of any object requires an infinite measurement (measuring with no margin of error even past the Planck length) which no human or computer can ever be capable of. Therefore, Laplace's Demon will never exist.

Determinism will not help in predicting the future. However, determinism intrigues me because of its moral implications. If determinism is true, then I cannot be blamed for anything I do. I wouldn't need to feel shame for my actions or try to change. I also couldn't stop myself from feeling shame or trying—and failing—to change. According to determinism, most people are doomed to futilely act as if determinism were false. And the only ones who will believe determinism is true are already pre-determined to do so. If determinism were true, existence would be a bleak and frozen landscape.

Determinism follows intuitively from the idea that past things cause present things. To disrupt the claims of determinism there needs to be some alternative theory. I will explore two of all the possible options. The first option is radical choice. Radical choice is the idea that our actions are random (undetermined). Radical choice requires rejecting the idea that everything has a cause, because radical choice has no cause. I don't

like radical choice because randomness doesn't feel like freedom. The second option is called compatibilism. Compatibilism says that a person's actions are primarily determined by factors which are internal to that person. The actions are still determined, but they are determined by the person. Therefore, the person has free will. If a person acts because they were forced by external actions, then they are not acting freely. Between determinism, radical choice, and compatibilism I lean towards compatibilism. But I have experiences that support all three. At times, I acted based on programming I felt came from my upbringing. Other times, I took an action that did not align with my intentions or my upbringing. Most of the time I feel that my actions are based on forces that I consider my own.

I have one problem with compatibilism: it only works if it is possible to define the self and the self lasts for a meaningful length of time. I pointed out at the beginning of the essay how it is unclear how many people I have been in my life. I like compatibilism because it says I am in control of myself. I am also responsible for the actions I take. If I have been many different selves, then I am not responsible for what my previous self did. I also need to be separate from other people and the world around me. If my self is not just my mind and my body, but my cell phone too (which acts as external memory and a cognitive aid), then it is not clear where I end and everything else begins.

These problems seem separate, but they are deeply intertwined. I will start with the problem of change. I change over time. When do those changes result in a new self and when does the old self continue with a change? I must continue existing despite some changes, or else I would never stay the same self. Aristotle says that for something to change but not become a new thing, there must be something that remains constant

(Physics, 1.7, 190a15). Intuition says that the physical body underlies changes. I don't think I have ever changed bodies. However, consider a stalk of wheat. Jesus says that the seed must die so that the stalk of wheat can grow. The stalk does not miraculously generate without the seed breaking down. The seed doesn't break down, and then the stalk miraculously generates. The seed changes into the stalk. When did the seed die, and the stalk become born? Perhaps the stalk is still the seed. In that case, it is likely the seed is still part of the stalk that it came from. If that is true, then all stalks of wheat and all seeds are actually just one self. According to evolutionary biology wheat did not come from nothing. Wheat is an evolution from an older form of grass. Grass evolved from older plants, which evolved from ocean algae, which evolved from microbes. Everything evolved from those microbes. Therefore, we must say that the seed of wheat dies, and the stalk is born or else all of life is one self. Buddhists embrace the idea that all beings are one being. Total unity seems like a beautiful idea, but it muddles the question of responsibility again. I must be separate from my mother, though I came out of her, if I am to be responsible for my actions.

My body and mind feel like me. However, they both refuse most of my commands. I cannot turn my hair black or white. I cannot grow taller by thinking about it. My body will die regardless of what I do. I command myself, "Don't be sad. Don't be stressed. Don't be anxious. Don't cry. Don't laugh." My emotions do not respond to commands, though I can influence them indirectly. My thoughts are similar, trying to not think of a large pink elephant is the surest way to think of a large pink elephant. Yet despite all of these hang-ups, I can't seem to get away from the idea that I am a whole self, independent and morally tasked with making decisions of eternal consequence.

I hardly noticed my lack of control over myself when I was younger. My emotions were so strong that my mind or my self or whatever the part of me that feels like me, never disagreed. Young children don't seem to have thoughts about their thoughts or desires about their desires, they lack reflexivity. At that age, the different parts of me never disagreed about what to do, what to value, or what to feel. I cried, laughed, slept, and talked wholeheartedly. Wholeheartedness is when my will, my desires, and my actions are in alignment. I took being wholehearted and unified for granted. No one ever told me that I might no longer be wholehearted, that there would come a day when my parts might go to war. The seeds of this war were planted in me at a young age, but their germination came long before I was born.

In church, I learned that the natural man is an enemy to God and has been since the fall of Adam (*The Book of Mormon*, Mos. 3.19). The natural man is one of my parts. However, no one talked about the natural man in themselves or in me. They talked about him as someone outside of church that I might see road rage driving or in the halls of school wearing a shirt without sleeves and very short pants. People like him would drink alcohol, swear, and disrespect their teachers. I was told that they did these things because they wanted to do bad things, and that made them bad people. I didn't want to be one of those people, so I resolved to never do any of the things that I was told were bad.

My teachers and parents were particularly vague about one certain kind of "bad thing." They said looking at people who are not wearing enough clothes was a sin, because it disrespected the bodies that God had given us. As I grew older and continued to have lessons in church about God's commandments, I began picking up hints as to why immodesty was such a big deal. Adults talked as if immodesty was the gateway drug

to all kinds of sinful behavior. It showed that someone had no morals and no self-respect, they were showing off their bodies for attention or to get something from other people.

By the time I was twelve, my parents and teachers told me not to kiss anyone and that girls who wore skimpy bathing suits were bad people. No one ever told me about sex directly. The one time I learned about sex was when my family went to the beach. My dad and I were sitting on beach chairs under an umbrella, and I was bored. I asked my dad how babies get made, and to tell me for real because I wasn't kidding around. I already knew that people were uncomfortable about sex for some reason. My dad tensed as I asked, despite his unflappable nature. He asked me what I already knew. I told him I knew it takes two people and babies are not brought by storks. I knew enough biology to have the idea of cells. I figured that somehow the cells of two people had to come together to make a baby. I knew that babies grew in mothers because I had seen pregnant women. As I explained, my dad relaxed somewhat. He said, I knew most of it already then. He then explained that men make cells called sperm and that women have cells called eggs. Then he got a little mumbley. I got the distinct impression he didn't want to say more than "mumble-mumble" about how exactly sperm goes from the man to the woman. He then explained how the sperm and the egg bond together and made a complete set of DNA which would be the new baby. He was relieved, and I felt uncomfortable at how awkward the conversation had been. I resolved to never bring up the subject again which avoided awkwardness but kept me in the dark about sex and sexuality.

I had no idea there was so much about sexuality, my body, and feelings that I didn't know. I saw no purpose for my body other than to transport my mind. I was never

told differently. The message I was told about my body was how many things could go wrong within it. If I caught a virus or got injured, then the mechanical machinery of my body would be inhibited until I healed. However, the mechanical view of bodies leaves out how bodies tie to emotions. The complexity of our neurochemicals is not sufficient to explain the qualitative experience of emotions, but that doesn't mean they are useless in trying to understand emotions. To me, emotions were like a virus or an injury. I got sad or angry for a while because some outside thing forced me to, but once the outside thing was resolved, then the emotion left.

As I began to hit puberty, my emotions changed with my body. I was much lonelier and more anxious. I worried a lot more about what others thought about me. I worried so much that I mentally harassed myself just to get the anticipation of criticism over with. I pretended to feel fine even though I suppressed a lot of questions, concerns, and doubt. No one taught to pay attention to my emotions, so if the emotion didn't grab me by the lapels and shake me, I ignored it. I don't know if this can be entirely attributed to how I was raised and the lack of things I was taught. Ignorance takes a lot of energy to overcome alone. Yet, I don't want to say that my upbringing and culture determined my behavior.

Most of what I did learn about bodies, sexuality, and emotions came slipped in the backdoor through stories. Stories, especially books, transported me to other worlds that were much more exciting than the real one. In a story, I could embody the main character and live a life with more agency, admiration, and achievements. But stories do not follow the laws of reality. Characters almost never get sick, injured, or tired. Relationships were

simplified to in love, friends, or enemies. Uncomfortable emotions were typically expressed through punching, arguments, or pep talks.

This meant that the vast majority of characters with a love interest never experienced rejection, never grappled with complexities in the relationship, and the biggest thing stopping them from achieving happily ever after was a villain or a rival to be defeated. Once a couple did get together, their relationship always meant total happiness for both parties, like an instant quick fix for any dissatisfaction with life. There was never any reason given for why the characters were attracted to each other besides being the same age and each fitting the aesthetic standards of their gender. What it felt like to be attracted was never addressed. Romance was just large amounts of Platonic love for the most beautiful person they saw. I believed that romantic love would feel the same as the love I have for my siblings, parents, and friends. I had no idea that a more hormonally based love was even possible, especially because I wasn't taught about how hormones affect the brain or how puberty brings on hormones.

Nevertheless, when I was fourteen years old there was an event where my ignorance about my sexuality, emotions, and body all collided. By that time, my body had been doing weird things for a while. When I was twelve years old, my first erection suddenly popped up uncomfortably in my pants. I have since learned that this is normal and most boys experience daytime erections at the very beginning of puberty. A few years later, my voice started to crack all over the place. Then my acne showed up. I knew technically that I was "in puberty," but I didn't remember a time before puberty. I just wished that my body wouldn't surprise me, my voice would hold a normal tone, and I wouldn't have swollen lumps on my face.

At the same time, I felt a lot of pressure to get good grades so I would be ready for high school. I hated middle school because I dreaded letting my parents and teachers down. When pressure is exerted on matter, it changes states. I think my parents and teachers intended to bring about a change of state in me. But they did not anticipate how much pressure I would bring on myself to flawlessly complete every assignment I was given. Newton's third law of motion is paraphrased as, "for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction." The opposite action of the pressure I put on myself was to split myself. One part of me wanted to do my homework and please my parents. The other part wanted to do anything besides homework: read a book, wander outside, watch a movie, etc. I forced myself to do the homework anyway by belittling and degrading the part of myself that resisted.

One night, as I was trying to find a reputable source about a particular Native American tribe, I wanted to take a break. But I didn't let myself because the report was due that night; if I took a break, then I wouldn't finish it by class tomorrow, and then I would get a poor grade and my teacher would be disappointed in me and my parents would be disappointed, and I would do terribly in high school and I wouldn't get into college, and then I would be living in a van down by the river! These kinds of thoughts were how I motivated myself through fear. The thoughts aren't true. One homework assignment does not determine my fate, but I felt that way as a teenager.

My two halves fought like two wolverines stuck in the bottom of a well. I tried to compromise between the two (a third part of me has showed up) by staying on the computer but looking up random things instead of researching the Native American tribe. I started by looking up books and characters from books that I liked. I was gratified to

find out that there were a lot of artists who liked the same books as me and had depicted scenes from the books. As I browsed their art, I found that some people had also written and drawn events that happened after the ending of the book. I had often daydreamed about what adventures Harry Potter, Taran Wanderer, and Hiccup Haddock III did after their stories ended as a way to escape feeling trapped. Most of my life, I have felt out of control. I can't even control things that are technically part of my body and mind, as I pointed out earlier. Stories give an illusion of control.

I think our minds are amazing because they can imagine more than we are sensing at any moment. As you have been reading this essay, your mind has taken bright and dark shapes and turned them into ideas, maybe even images that you experience as if they were real. I invite you to remember some time when you were so caught up with a story, memory, or idea that you were totally dissociated from your physical surroundings and body. For at least a moment, you were somewhere unreal. I think it can be a great tool for expanding empathy and learning from others without having to go through their experiences. But separating “the self” from my body, my feelings, and my surroundings opens the question of what would happen if I could lose my self entirely.

As I read these stories and scrolled through this art, I disassociated from my surroundings and felt the bliss of escape. And then I went deeper. I clicked on the art that was the most engaging and followed it wherever it went. Since I clicked on the most escapist pieces that meant I moved farther and farther into the private fantasies of these artists. I never knew that so many people fantasized about romance. For the first time, I saw depictions of cuddling, kissing, and what seemed like almost selfish acts of affection. I felt drawn to these depictions because they made me feel warm and tingly and excited.

These feelings surprised me and scared me because I had never felt this way before. I realized that people might kiss and cuddle because it felt pleasurable. My parents didn't kiss that much, and I thought kissing was just something that people did when they were older. Now, I wasn't kissing anyone in reality, but I could feel as if I was through these pictures. I just had to pretend that I was the man in the picture and that the woman who obviously valued and desired the man was valuing and desiring me. My hands started to shake, and my throat tightened up. I had never felt these things before, and it honestly scared me.

Now, dear reader, you may be wondering if the pictures I am describing are pornographic. I cannot give a definitive answer because pornography is hard to define. Some define pornography as pictures of nude bodies. The drawings I saw had some shirtless men, but no nude drawings. Some define pornography as depicting sexual acts. If kissing and cuddling are sexual acts, then yes. If sexual acts refer to intercourse, then no. Some define pornography as anything that a person finds arousing. I would say that I was aroused by looking at these pictures. I do not know your personal definition, nor your opinions about pornography. Regardless, please do not read any ill intent into my former self who was merely stumbling his way through life.

After a while I closed the computer and sat back, breathing heavily. I felt confused and tense. No one had ever told me that my body was naturally wired for attraction, that attraction is indiscriminate, and that attraction is only partly under my control. I wondered if I had done something wrong, and to avoid the anxiety of not knowing I assumed that I had sinned. If I had sinned, then I must be a bad person, because only a bad person would want to feel that way again. And I wanted to feel those

feelings again. The part of me that wanted to do the right thing clamped down on the part of me that wanted to feel that way again. I promised myself to never go looking for those pictures again. Then I could pretend this never happened. As long as this never happened again then I wouldn't be a bad person.

My decision lasted a few weeks at most. When I was trying to get work done and feeling stressed, it was like I couldn't stop myself. I felt like I had to go looking for something to make me feel different. In the moment escaping to fantasy seemed like the best and only course of action. Afterward, I would look back, and it would feel like it wasn't me that had made those decisions. It felt like something else had made those decisions for me. No matter what decisions or plans "I" had made before I started to work, I would still regularly engage in distraction, procrastination, and romantic fantasies, for the purpose of regulating my emotions. I engaged in this pattern of procrastination and avoidance for years.

My self-divided into three parts who together perpetuated this cycle. One part used fear and vitriol to get the other parts to do what they were supposed to. The second part wanted to feel good and would do anything that avoided pain. These first two parts were caught in a vicious cycle of the first part loathing the second part for what we did, but that only motivated the second part further to seek out behaviors that numbed the pain being dished out by the first part. The third part observed the other two and despaired of getting either to change their behavior.

My three parts align with the three parts of the soul according to Plato. Plato claimed each part of the soul explained different attributes of the mind. The part of the soul that housed emotions and desired honor was called "spirit (*Republic* 581a)." In me,

this part encouraged me to perform well in school and to obey authority figures. I wanted praise. The part of me that drove my “spirit” absolutely mad was my “appetitive” part. The appetitive part desires food, comfort, and sex and houses the desires for those things (*Republic* 439d). The third part, called “reason,” houses the thinking mind and desires knowledge and truth (*Republic* 442c). Reason feels the most like me. I don’t know if everyone feels as I do, but reason is the part I most identify with. Often, I do not comprehend the nature of my other parts which leads me to be surprised by them. Plato claimed that reason should govern the other two parts and that spirit can often be reason’s ally against appetite (*Republic* 442ab). My appetitive part continually frustrated my spirit by procrastinating and distracted me with online browsing. My reason and spirit agreed that it would be better to work hard and better my education. However, reason seemed powerless against appetite’s craving and no amount of anger or vitriol from spirit stopped my cycles of acting out then swearing to never do it again only to break that promise.

The Greeks call this “*akrasia*,” which roughly translates to weakness of will (Steward). Harry Frankfurt would call this a conflict between a first order desire and a second order volition. A first order desire is a desire that has actions as its object (*Freedom of the Will* 7). “I want to feel calm and avoid pain,” is a first order desire. A second order desire is a desire with a desire as its object (*Freedom of the Will* 6). “I want to want to not procrastinate my homework,” is a second order desire. A second order volition is a second order desire that I not only desire, but that I want to motivate my actions. My second order volition is the desire I want to be actualized in my behavior (*Freedom of the Will* 10-11). I really wanted to stop using content on the internet to

essentially self-medicate. But my first order desire was stronger than my second order volition.

Everyone engages in self-soothing behaviors. It is normal and healthy to do something fun or distracting when we feel overwhelmed. Self-soothing becomes a problem when it starts to take away from life instead of adding to it. Because these artists' depictions were a way for me to feel physically attracted, it was a consistent way for me to numb out my more difficult emotions. It started to feel like I couldn't concentrate or get work done without spending time surfing the internet looking for something to make me feel different. On top of that, I felt shame for what I was doing. I thought that I was doing something absolutely terrible that proved I was an evil person for wanting to do it. This made me feel really uncomfortable and scared and sad and angry. All of those emotions were emotions I didn't want to feel, so I numbed them out. It felt like a cycle I couldn't escape.

For other people, romantic fantasies may not be something that makes them feel so strongly. Video games or social media are probably more common forms of this same cycle—possibly without the added layer of self-shaming, excuses, self-deception, and hiding. My brother was always better at video games than me, which turned me off from them. And I was raised in a very anti-social-media culture. If my circumstances had been different, those might have been my preferred forms of numbing. However, can I blame my circumstances for my actions? No one was forcing me to move the mouse or type the keyboard to go scrolling on the internet. No one else was puppeting my body. If no one else was making those decisions, then I must have been performing those actions, despite how much inner conflict I felt.

Frankfurt would say that I didn't have freedom of the will because I was failing to act on the will that I wanted (*Freedom of the Will* 12). But if I was performing the actions without coercion, then how could I have been acting unfreely? Socrates claimed that *akrasia* could not exist because no one would purposefully pursue something they believed was bad (*Protagoras* 358d). Frankfurt's reply to Socrates is that I could have been acting unfreely if there were some parts of me that were external to *my self* and those parts were determining my actions instead of *my self*. *My self* or *the self* is the part(s) of me that feels most like me, the "I." These parts must have been outside *the self*, if they are overpowering *the self* or keeping it prisoner.

Frankfurt claims that parts of me could become external to *the self* if I chose to externalize them. If I identify a desire as being central to who I am and by so doing externalize contrary desires, then there are parts of me that I see as inside of me and other parts that are outside (*Externality* 65). Frankfurt claims externalizing will eliminate inner conflict, even if I am not free. Because *the self* is no longer in conflict with itself, but with outside forces (*Wholeheartedness* 168-169). As if accepting determinism would be more peaceful than inner turmoil. However, externalizing didn't work for me. I certainly identified with my second order desire not to seek out sexual feelings. I externalized sexual feelings and tried to make them not a part of me. I still felt responsible even when it felt like an outside force was overwhelming me. Frankfurt claimed that externalizing would give the inner self a better chance at changing behavior, but it did nothing to help me change my behavior. If anything, this seemed to make the feelings I was suppressing more powerful and more difficult to control.

I think there are two reasons for this. First, I tried to externalize any feelings of sexual attraction. Who I am as a sexual being is actually very central to who I am. Succeeding in rejecting that part of myself would require staying a child forever. I didn't want that, nor was it possible for me to deny my body maturing. Truly externalizing those feelings would be analogous to cutting off my own arm. Second, contrary to what Frankfurt said, externalizing is counterproductive. J. David Velleman critiqued Frankfurt's model by bringing up the example of the Rat Man. The Rat Man was a patient of Sigmund Freud who suffered from a split personality. His two personalities revolved around loving and violently hating his father. Frankfurt's model would suggest if the Rat Man can locate his true self in one personality and externalize the other, then he would be a consistent, unified self. The Rat Man attempted to reject his hatred for his father and focus only on his love, but this only made the neurosis worse. According to Velleman, if the Rat Man could have accepted his own ambivalence and conflicting feelings, he wouldn't have torn himself in two (355-356). My own experience aligns with that of the Rat Man. Trying to reject my feelings only seemed to make them stronger.

In the past decade I have worked to accept all of my parts. My tendency to distraction and my sexual desires are central to who I am. I still grapple with the shame I absorbed growing up around sexuality and failure. In that time, my fiancé has helped me to accept my sexual feelings and to accept that being attracted to her physically is not selfish. Early on in our relationship, I was so worried about us only connecting physically that I refused to kiss her. I am still learning to be comfortable with myself and with her.

I also had to choose to believe that I am free to determine my own behaviors. At the same time, I am still affected by my upbringing and outside forces. I balance between these contradictory positions. Trying to totally reject the influences of my youth would be just as harmful as trying to reject my sexual nature. I still believe in God. I still believe that most of the things I learned in church are good, despite some flaws. I don't think that it is possible for me to act as if I didn't have the upbringing I did. In a way, it determines how I think and act.

However, I do not believe that determinism is true. If I were purely a product of my environment, then I would have remained in the same state unless something else acted on me. My biology would continue encouraging reproductive behavior through seeking pleasure and avoiding pain. The cultural pressure of my environment would forbid me from talking about my feelings and would demand that I feel shame for them. These two would have locked me into the situation I was in as a fourteen-year-old. Unless some outside force stronger than both of them broke me out. Instead, I sought to be connected with other people because I care about doing what is right. At the same time, I chose not to numb my feelings and to address my stress in healthy ways. And I came to accept these parts of myself. I determined my choices, not an outside force.

I cannot prove that something in the past did not cause my actions. Nor can I prove that my actions were caused by me; my feelings may be mere illusions. But I know that if I had believed my actions were determined or random, that I would have felt more powerless. I do not think I would have made the changes or growth that I did. In this case, I am inclined to trust my feelings that I do make choices.

In a way, I was acting freely when I avoided my homework by browsing online. I was being motivated by feelings that were mine, even if I wished they weren't. This did not mean I was able to change my behavior overnight. Because my self is complex with potentially competing parts. I am not capable of absolute control over all of my parts. Like a stone rolling down a hill, my upbringing gave me momentum that I had to redirect or counteract gradually. I have gradually changed as I have connected with other people and ideas. As I share with others, they tell me about their insecurities and regrets. I feel less alone.

Who I am is still not entirely clear to me. I often default to viewing my shirt as separate from me, but my toes as being mine. However, when I connect with other people perhaps, I am integrating with my larger self. Trying to isolate and subjugate my parts caused my inner turmoil. If we are all part of one whole, it makes sense to me that connecting with the larger whole would generate peace. I am still affected by others, my upbringing, my body, etc. And yet, that doesn't stop me from being free.

On the Existence of Other Minds

It is theoretically possible that I am the only real person in existence and everything I have experienced is just a simulation. I exist as the thinker of my thoughts and the perceiver of my perceptions. However, I do not have immediate knowledge of other minds, which makes it much easier to doubt their existence. Yet, I think very few people (even including Descartes) truly believe that other people do not exist. Other people surprise me too much for me to believe that I am simply imagining everyone. And I think it is just too implausible that everyone else is a wind-up toy without a mind. Just because I have good reason to believe other minds exist does not mean I understand other minds. When I started life, I didn't ask myself what other people thought or felt because the immediacy of my own thoughts and feelings drowned them out. The tacit belief that other people have minds grew gradually in me. And even then, I couldn't comprehend that their perspective centered on themselves instead of me.

Look around at your surroundings. Become aware of how your vision shifts from point to point. No matter how you try, it is not possible to physically see from any point of view other than your own. Photos and videos and essays may bring something into view that we were not seeing before, but we can never remove ourselves from the perceiving experience. We are all born that way. Understanding other points of view requires effort.

If we could experience each other's thoughts, what a different world it would be. If we could feel what other people felt and taste what someone else was tasting, what a different world it would be. The world that I am in seems to have large dividers between me and you. Even these words I am writing are not truly my thoughts. This is the magic

of symbols. Somehow, I pick strings of symbols from a common language based on my inner dialogue and you see those symbols and apply your own inner dialogue to them to generate thoughts that, as far as I can determine, are relatively similar to the thoughts I had. The mental touches the physical to try and touch the mental again in a different sphere.

Since we are each stuck in our own world, I cannot know that other minds like mine exist with the same certainty as I know that my mind exists. My own experiences barrage me and are undeniable. Bertrand Russell claims that I can know other minds exist with a strong degree of probability, but only by analogy. He uses the word analogy because the external behavior of other human beings is analogous to my own: not identical, but when they are compared very similar (Russell 655-6). When I utter the statement, "I am thirsty." It is because I feel thirsty. When I see someone else utter the statement, "I am thirsty," I note their sweaty brow and ragged breath and slow walk. If I was in that state that they are in, I would be feeling thirsty, and it would give me cause to make the statement, "I am thirsty." Therefore, it is probable that they are feeling thirsty and that is why they say, "I am thirsty." Similar reasoning to this can be applied to almost any instance of behavior by other human beings, with good results (Russell 657). I have applied this to animals, fish, lizards, and bugs with poorer and poorer results. My behavior is less and less analogous to these beings, therefore, it is less and less probable that I know they have minds like mine.

However, if a robot and I were both pushed off a cliff we would both fall. The robot could even scream and flail its arms if programmed correctly. But our analogous behavior should not indicate that we both have minds. The way to get around this

problem requires understanding what we mean when we talk about minds. Consider a physically identical copy of me that doesn't actually have a mind. My duplicate looks like me, acts like me, and has the same internal structure as me. (Robots and computers are often thought of this way, they can act as if they have a mind but don't.) What is the difference between me and my mindless duplicate or a robot? The difference is a lack of qualitative experience. My duplicate can get lost in the desert, but he will not feel thirsty. My duplicate may receive photons on his retina, but he will not see red. Salt may react to the tastebuds on my duplicate's tongue, but he will not experience saltiness. The sensations that come with having a mind are called "qualia."

Russell's analogy works because I assume that my actions are caused by my qualia. Anger motivates me to be abrupt and loud. Sadness motivates me to slow down and rest. When I perceive an action in another that is best explained by the existence of qualia like mine then I am justified by analogy to believe they have a mind. However, as the possibility of my duplicate shows, there is no way to prove that another being has a mind. There is no physical evidence of qualia and no physical explanation of qualia (Tye 235-236). Therefore, the best we have is analogy.

Most people never doubt that other people have minds. They default to assuming that an action was caused by a mind, even to the point of personifying the weather and common objects. Therefore, Russell's purpose is to merely justify a common intuition. My point in explaining Russell is to take the analogy one step further. If my justification of knowing that other minds exist is by analogy, then my path to understanding how other people think or feel is also by analogy. I think this is important because analogy is probabilistic. I cannot know exactly how someone else feels or what they are thinking in

a certain situation. But I have a high likelihood of understanding their general reactions; assuming I have sufficient self-knowledge to draw correct analogies. Unfortunately, overcoming the barriers between my perspective and other people has never come easily for me.

When I was young, I hadn't been around long enough to know who I was. The universe revolved around me because anything that didn't revolve around me was out of my sight. As with a telescope, I could only see the light that was already focused on me. Any light that wasn't moving my direction was invisible.

On my first day of school, I really wanted to be friends with everyone in my class. I couldn't imagine anyone not liking me, because I liked me. My own experience was all I was capable of considering at the time. Therefore, I believed my experience was objective fact. I thought making friends would be easy because I assumed my classmates and teacher would think about me the same way I thought about myself. We weren't assigned seats in my first kindergarten class. I sat down in the middle of the classroom so that everyone would be equally close to me. We had our lesson, and some get-to-know-you activities, but very few of my classmates took notice of me. In fact, no one paid me any special attention for weeks. I was surprised but not disheartened. Perhaps, I needed to make the first move. I decided to befriend the kids who played basketball at recess. I picked them because they felt like a large and cohesive group. This seemed the best way to get lots of friends. Never mind that I had no idea how to play basketball. It couldn't be that hard.

My first time playing, I didn't know how to dribble, I couldn't throw the ball more than three feet, and I just felt like I was ruining the game for the other boys. Several

boys were annoyed that I was trying to join the game when I had no idea what I was doing. None of them would care if I stopped coming or stopped existing. I felt betrayed by these boys who were supposed to be my friends. I saw myself as the main character of life and believed that everything happened was about me. I was oblivious to the fact that every other person saw themselves as the main character of their story. Therefore, I interpreted everyone else's actions as meaning something about me. The kid who didn't pass me the ball didn't like me. The teacher who called on Simon instead of me was purposefully ignoring me. If Dakota couldn't remember my name, it must be because he hated me. Each of these people was likely not even thinking of me when they did these things. I interpreted them as personal slights and ultimately betrayals. After a few months of what I thought of as malicious exclusion, I decided that if people who were supposed to be my friends were so disloyal and mean, then I didn't need friends, and it wasn't worth it to make friends. I adopted a policy of isolation to avoid feeling like I was only a secondary character in someone else's story.

If my life were a middle grade school drama there would be some kid who would see my struggles and try to befriend me. When another character likes the protagonist it proves to the reader that the protagonist is likeable. Often the protagonist needs this message to. No such figure appeared in my life. However, I don't want to give the impression that I was a victim of bullying or that people weren't nice to me. I am confident that every kid I tried to play basketball with had a part of them that wanted to reach out and be kind to others. I wonder if any of them felt concern for me. The part of the soul dedicated to doing what is right (reason) was likely overridden by their part that wanted playground prestige (spirit). Being a good basketball player means that people

want you on their team. Being a poor basketball player meant that you dragged your team down. Unless you have some other redeeming quality there is no advantage to spending time with the whiney kid who thinks they know it all. I wonder if I had humbly asked to be taught how to play the game then maybe someone would have taken me under their wing. Instead, I assumed that I could jump to the top of the pile because I am just that awesome.

My young self's perspective may seem self-centered, but I can see similar behavior all around. How many people spend hours every morning agonizing over their outfit and their hair when no one will notice their fashion choices for more than a few hours? How many people work so hard and almost torture themselves to look good in a swimsuit when no one at the beach will think about their body for more than a few seconds? No one can totally abandon their own perspective, and so, most people worry about themselves a lot more than other people.

My self-imposed isolation did not give me the safety I sought. I really wanted to connect with other people. Isolating was an extreme action to cover strong feelings of rejection. As the hero of my own story, I was blind to my dependence on others because the hero is supposed to be strong enough to conquer alone. Being strong alone is a lie. There is no situation where one person alone can do better than many people working in unity. I can see this clearly when I look at our modern world. The combined effort of generations of humans has produced technological marvels, towering infrastructure, and stunning art that no human could accomplish alone. (No human was ever born alone, not even Jesus Christ.)

However, cooperation is harder than exploiting the system alone. It is possible to use other people to get what one needs without contributing to the system. I needed other people when I was isolating myself. I tried to manipulate them into fulfilling my needs. One of my needs is to feel important and valued by others. In high school P.E., I knew I would get praise and admiration if I could get my team to win the game we were playing that day: basketball, dodgeball, soccer, etc. Sports draw me in because they are made of teams, people who are loyal to each other and win together. But at this point I had decided to not trust people which turns a team into a tool for getting glory. I shouted at my teammates and told them what to do. I think my advice would have improved our performance. But no one followed my advice because up until that point, I had never contributed to their lives. From their perspective, I wasn't trying to help them, I was only trying to help myself. They resented me for trying to take charge and did the opposite of whatever I said. I thought my teammates were dumb for not seeing that my advice was good. I was the fool for not seeing how I looked through their eyes.

Language is primarily a tool to facilitate cooperation (Lewis 173). People communicate meaning through language because we have been trained to associate meanings to the stimulus of written symbols and spoken sounds. Cooperation builds from shared meaning. Every mind imposes meaning on their stimulus. A computer receives a command and executes a response, without imposing meaning. A raccoon receives the input of a bright light, applies fear and the idea of danger onto the stimulus, and runs away. Meaning is tied to qualia. I could only begin to empathize with others when I saw each person as a meaning making being. Language articulates meaning more precisely than anything else I know of. And yet, words often wreak havoc when they were meant to

heal or confuse when they were meant to clarify. Making meaning and making language are some of the most human-like behaviors. Therefore, to understand other humans we must understand language.

Every act of language has three parts: the locutionary act, the illocutionary act, and the perlocutionary act, according to J. L. Austin. There may be many more parts, and I agree with Austin that there are at least these three. The locutionary act is the literal act of making language. It includes what words were used and their basic meaning. But the illocutionary act is what the utterance means in context (Austin 98). If I say, “stop doing that,” to a dog crossing my lawn it is the same locutionary act if I say it to a member of the city council frowning at me. But the illocutionary act is different because in one case my meaning is for a dog to stop crossing my lawn and the other is for a politician to stop frowning at me. The final part of the linguistic act is the perlocutionary act, this is the effect that the utterance has on the hearers (Austin 99). The dog may hear me, but it does not understand me so my perlocutionary act may fail to get any sort of response. But the politician may respond in a wide variety of ways. She may continue frowning at me because I told her not to, or she may stop, or she may resent me for my utterance. All of these are traced to my utterance. And while I have the most control over my locutionary acts, I have less control over my illocutionary acts and even less over my perlocutionary acts. Most people grasp the ramification of their words. However, I only saw the literalness of things. I dealt in denotations, not connotations. People around me might see a depth of meaning in a glance or a furrowed brow, but I only see the literal action. This means I am a terrible flirt.

On my second date with Aurianna, the woman who is now my fiancée, I told her that I wanted to focus on our friendship before being romantic. That was my locutionary act. My illocutionary act was to say I only wanted to be friends, and I am not interested in a romantic relationship. My perlocutionary act was to friendzone Aurianna. I made this comment early in the date, which felt very awkward from that point on. I didn't know why the date felt awkward. I was very attracted to her, and I wanted to get to know her better. Thankfully, Aurianna texted my sister, telling her that I had friendzoned her. My sister confronted me with this knowledge, and I denied ever friendzoning her. As my sister made me rehearse what I had said during the date, I slowly realized that my words may have had implications beyond my intended meaning because of the context they were said in. I texted Aurianna, apologizing for my blunder and asking for grace. She enthusiastically let me have another shot. I made sure on this third date to express how attracted I was to her and how much I wanted to date.

A few days later, I sat down with my mom to go over my dating strategies. The friendzone blunder revealed I may not be a smooth with women as I thought I was. I had followed the same pattern of dating for the past four years, rarely getting more than a first date. Perhaps I was the problem, not the women I dated. My mom explained to me how most women think about dating. They are constantly on alert for signals that someone likes them or doesn't like them. Holding a door open for my date shows some interest. Outpacing her in the walk from the car to the movie theater shows that I am not that interested. One of the biggest signals is the lack of a signal. If a man is interested in a woman, she expects him to engage in some gentle flirting: brushing her elbow, talking only to her, trying to sit close together at dinner, maintaining eye contact, etc. My mom

asked me if I did any of those things. I didn't. All I would do is ask a woman on a date, assume she knows that means I am interested in her, and wait for her to make the next move. My utter lack of flirting meant that almost every girl I went out with likely thought I wasn't interested in romance. I am now confident that I wouldn't recognize flirting unless it hit me over the head with a two by four. I had never thought of trying to flirt before. I just assumed that she either liked me or she didn't and there was nothing I could do to encourage which one I wanted. In retrospect, my oblivious behavior likely discouraged many potential relationships. I think most women want a man who is capable of being subtle, and I did not give that vibe. Aurianna, bless her heart, chose me for my better qualities.

Until I met Aurianna, I almost gave up on dating completely. I would complain to my friends that it would be so much better if we could just go up to the people we are interested in and ask them if they are interested back. If yes then put in the effort, if not then move on and not get our hopes up. It was frustrating for me to go on a series of first dates and feel like I did not connect with anyone. I was frustrated to always be the one asking and never the one asked. But I think this helps protect women, who often bear a heavier burden in relationships and have the most to risk if something goes awry. Maybe that is just my survivor's bias coming through. A married person can look back on their dating years with rose-tinted glasses because of how things turned out.

What astonishes me is that, until I asked my mom, no one ever told me how to act on a date so that the girl would know that I liked her. No one ever told me that I need to put in a significant amount of effort just to get her to trust me. I would never have figured it out on my own. Why did it take four years of dating before someone explained this to

me? Maybe everyone assumed that someone else had already explained it to me, like when a both members of a couple assume that their partner grabbed the concert tickets. Or I wonder if other people just pick up social cues more easily than me.

I can't help making expectations and having assumptions about the future. Assuming that a table will not walk away seems to be a fair assumption; the table is only something that receives and carries action, it does not act for itself. But any belief about another person seems riddled with exceptions and paths to failure. Uncertainty creates fear because it is hard to prepare for the unknown. Expectations create a feeling of safety because it makes the future seem more predictable. Thriving in the natural world requires understanding natural laws that are relatively consistent. I expect the sun to rise in the morning and set in the evening. I expect I will need shelter to stay warm when the sun isn't warming me. These expectations are regular and predictable. In modern society, expectations about natural forces form the backdrop of my beliefs. Front and center are my expectations about how I and others should behave. We have created a society that protects us from the forces of nature. To protect ourselves from society our ancestors have created expectation scripts. Human nature varies too widely to create universal scripts. Instead, our ancestors created rules and scripts that seem arbitrary from a modern perspective. By exerting pressure on each other to follow the scripts they gain power to protect those who follow them and punish those who don't. These sets of rules create order and stability in society, but they are not perfect.

The prime example of these rules are languages. Language allows us to use symbols to communicate meaning. How language does this is practically a miracle, and I won't talk about those theories in this essay. When I and another person speak a common

language, John Lewis claims we have at least two expectations in common: that I will only utter statements I believe are true in that language, and that my interlocuter is being truthful in that language. These assumptions are necessary for two people to use a language to coordinate with each other (170). These two expectations form the foundation of all the other rules and expectations communicated by language. Examples include, thou shalt keep the Sabbath day holy, do not walk on the grass, and wash your hands after using the restroom. Language can also be used to coordinate on a personal level: pass me a napkin, rub your belly while patting your head, and get out of town.

When a child is born, they do not come with an understanding of how to act in the world. They have to learn rules of etiquette, laws, culture, and societal expectations from parents, teachers, and peers. A child who understands the rules has a cheat code to knowing how to coordinate with other people. However, the expectations will only carry a child so far in genuinely connecting with other people. I deeply wanted to connect with other people from a very young age. I love to be close to people and to know them well. Expectations help me to make a good first impression and not offend people. But real connection requires that I am authentic. I can't follow a script to make friends. When I was in school, I thought I could just act a certain way and I would make a bunch of friends. I was wrong. My expectations were dashed and that scared me. So, I decided to isolate. By the time I was in middle school, I was drowning in loneliness. I felt so confused that I couldn't see a way to real connection with myself, let alone anyone else. Finding myself took a lot of work and time. Now I have good connections with other people because I am learning to be authentic.

The scary thing though is that even if I am authentic with myself and other people, there is no guarantee that I would have any friends. Friendship, connection, and cooperation all require two people who are willing to be authentic. I can't do it alone. Even if two people are willing to be authentic, there is a lot outside either of their control. They need to meet each other for some reason, find each other mutually attractive in some way, and have the resources to invest in a relationship. In my experience, my happiness largely depends on the support of other people. Without my parents, I have no idea how I would have fed myself or been physically safe. Without friends, I have no idea how I would have understood my own feelings and body. Without other people, would I have ever learned what it is like to feel love? Aurianna is a wonderful, kind person that I love. Yet, she hasn't made many strong friends in the past two years, despite trying very hard. She feels frustrated and scared because what if she never makes any friends in college? There is no guarantee that she will.

I believe the need to cooperate defines the human condition. Our diversity means that as a unified group, we can accomplish more together than alone. However, unity is easier said than done. Unity requires understanding that each person is the center of their own little universe. Each person is a unique and separate mind that is both so similar and so different to my own mind. To value the minds, experiences, perspectives, and qualia of another mind, I have to understand myself well enough to recognize our shared humanity despite our stark differences. I also must overcome my inherent self-centeredness because from my perspective I am the center of the universe. The rules and expectations of language and society are tools to help me do this. But words can have impacts I do not mean them to have, and rules are not sufficient to create genuineness or empathy.

Language and physical acts are only imperfect ways of communicating meaning. Despite those imperfections, so much connection is possible through language. But there is no promise that each of us will get the connection we seek. Few things terrify me more than being truly alone in an uncaring universe. All I can do is know myself and reach through symbols toward the constellation of souls around me, hoping that they will reach my reaching.

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