



The most important of all human qualities

The most influential of all human characteristics is fear

Human beings have existed for over two hundred thousand years, and there is but one characteristic that has enabled them to outlast many species that currently only appear in biology books: fear. Throughout history, our race has endured many crises, especially during ancient times, and it has been fear all along that has kept us from extinction. Fear allows us to take a step back, analyse the situation, and make a more meditated choice.

In a world where hostility is the rule, fear acts as the quintessential defence system, preventing people from encountering many of the hazards that they would otherwise have to face and succumb to. Likewise, if the looming danger is imminent, fear is bound to provide its wielder with the best course of action to undergo the situation and (if possible) remain unscathed. When we walk into a dark alley, our hearing seems to sharpen, our breathing quickens, and we can feel the adrenaline



pumping through each and every vein and artery, and this is owing to our ability to feel fear and get ready for the worst case scenario. Were a criminal to come out of the shadows, our body would already be in fight or flight mode, deftly tuned to perform at its finest whatever instructions our brain may dictate.

Nevertheless, fear's range of influence is not only restricted to dangerous situations, for it is transversal to any of our actions. Why do we not cross the street when the traffic lights are red? Why do we pay our taxes? Well, because we do not consider being run over by a car or going to jail something alluring. We fear the possibility of those outcomes, and therefore we refrain from taking any step towards them. We become abiding citizens and follow every rule in fear of punishment. This feeling, then, becomes the very foundation of civilization, guiding our behaviour, indicating to us what to do and what not to do if the smiting smack of law and the merciless strike of death are to be avoided. The concern of losing the ones that are dear to us and the worry of hurting people's feelings are also important matters to consider. Fear reminds us that we are not alone in this



universe, and that what we do has an effect that, if not considered, may cause an undesired result.

Historically, fear has also been a source of inspiration, one of the most recurrent muses. There is something enticing about death, something mysterious, and fearsome of what may follow it. It is this dread that has made many artists compose their greatest works. This is clearly illustrated by Dante's *Divine Comedy*, in which he describes his passage through the three realms of the dead: Hell, Purgatory and Heaven. Hell is depicted with such detail that it would make the most sceptical reader think twice before committing any sin.

Fear encompasses all human existence, it is something that permeates our selves and that rules over our everyday actions and thoughts. However, powerful and controlling though fear may be, it ought not to be allowed to govern us. It has assured our survival and the survival of many other species, it has been with us since the beginning of humankind's existence, and it has helped us to see things from other perspectives, so it should be taken into consideration when making decisions, but it need not



be the only deciding factor. Fear is “a tool” at our disposal, not the other way around, so we must learn when to use it.

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Consciousness and the soul

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines consciousness as the “awareness or sentience of internal or external existence”. For thousands of years, humans have been attempting to decipher what it is that differentiates us from the other living creatures on the planet, which, for all intents and purposes, are not very physically different from us. We have the same flesh and bones, reproduction and life cycles as most other mammals, but we also have gods, arts, wars and mathematics. These and so many other things make us uniquely and unequivocally human; they create a vast distance between us and all other living things. In this essay I will attempt to elucidate the reasons why consciousness is the most important of human qualities.

Consciousness is the voice that we hear inside our heads all the time. It is what makes us learn to live from the second we are born, and gradually takes the form of our native language and the sound of our own voice. When we get old, it withers much slower than our fragile bodies. It is a force and a source of



constant creation, whether in our neverending need to make decisions or in our much deeper need to understand life. As a species, our knowledge and our power are limited and ever-growing. Our imagination, nevertheless, is an infinite universe that is open for us to travel through whenever we have time to ourselves. Science and religion are the result of billions of minds stacking the products of their journey on top of one another, with every generation learning from the ones before and tweaking the details of their worldview to move forward. In the end, our consciousness produces a million questions for every answer.

As far as we know, every other type of living being is quite indifferent to the finitude and insignificance of their lives, but humans rely on spirituality to deal with the conscious obscurity of the nature of our souls. The light of our consciousness allows us to see within the walls of a hypothetical room, but the doors of birth and death are closed shut. We shall never know whether the room our soul resides in has been built and will be destroyed along with us, or if it is a small chamber in a hallway of reincarnations.

Anthropologists locate the beginning of conscious and reflective thought in homo sapiens between 10,000 and 7,000 years ago, judging by the spiritual relics that have been discovered which belong to forgotten societies. The oldest texts



we know were written about 5,000 years ago, and only from that point forward can we get the slightest hint of how ancient humanity crafted its cosmovision. Nevertheless, there is much we have yet to discover and recover. Monuments such as Stonehenge, the Egyptian pyramids, Machu Picchu and the Easter Island Moai had to their people a spiritual significance that we do not fully comprehend yet. As long as humans have existed, we have built our collective souls around what we believe we are. Maybe pawns in a game of chess played by the gods, maybe the handicrafts of an almighty Creator, maybe a mere coincidence.

All the things that we have been able to create as a species derive, ultimately, from our ability to think about the concept of thought itself, and ask ourselves some (as of yet) unanswerable questions: do we have souls? what is real? where do we come from? where are we going?

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