

WHEN WE ARE LOST

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Moving, lingering, and keeping silent, we are walking around my great grandmother's coffin. My great grandmother, who suffered five years of Alzheimer's, is now lying in a cold box. Every single moment now strikes me like a flying bullet. Six years ago, when my great grandfather passed away suddenly, my great grandmother was occupied with endless sorrow. Reclining in her chair, facing the empty ground outside the door, she waited for my great grandfather's return. In such a state, my great grandmother was finally engulfed by Alzheimer's and then passed away for good.

Years later, when I recall this memory, I realize that life is vulnerable, and it can fade away in an instant. I cried at that funeral because of the harsh feeling that I would never have a chance to see my great grandmother again. However, when I rethink what was underneath those tears, I find that the answer is the fear of death. We used to think that once we conquered the mystery of life, we would be capable of conquering the fear of death, but the facts have taken us far from that naïve dream. Even worse, the facts generated by science have had a disastrous effect, corrupting people's faith in science, the universe, and life itself.

Science, for thousands of years, has been defined as the search for the "fundamental laws of nature," as Alan Lightman describes in his essay, "The Accidental Universe." Despite this common definition, the multiverse theory posed by a few premier physicists, years ago, has disrupted the basic principles of science by arguing that there are an infinite number of universes, and thus our universe and its laws are just "a random throw of the cosmic dice" (Lightman). Lightman writes that theoretical scientists feel extremely discouraged by the multiverse theory because they are the ones who "want to know why" regarding every question, and the multiverse theory mocks such curiosity by answering: there is no reason; it is just what it is. In other words, if every principle that human beings have discovered was only created by accident, it would seem impossible for any scientist to discover a principle

that can explain every tiny phenomenon, since there are numerous universes out there, which run on totally different principles from ours.

What remains more frustrating is that the latest theories posed by physicists, such as "eternal inflation" and "string theory," all lead to the conclusion that the multiverse is a plausible theory (Lightman). Such claims have truly brought great shock to the scientific community, and scientists have begun to doubt the meaning of their work. As Alan Guth says to Lightman: "There will still be a lot for us to understand, but we will miss out on the fun of figuring everything out from first principle." We used to think that we were so smart and that we had figured everything out, but the plausibility of the multiverse theory, for instance, has called into question all of the concepts we have been building for hundreds of years. More horrible is the futility, according to Lightman, that many scientists feel in the face of the multiverse theory. That is, although we are part of the universe, and the universe is within our reach, we are still too weak to discover its truths.

The multiverse theory has the potential to stymie not only scientists' faith, but also the entire human race's perception of life. If there really are multiple universes, then the formation of life on the Earth would just be a result of random chance, caused by an infinite number of universes. Such a claim only compounds the vagueness surrounding the meaning of life. For years, we have tried to decode the mysteries of life's formation, but we never thought that we would one day be denied the meaning of our own discoveries. It is terrifying and distressing to find that humans have been caught in an inescapable loop: we question, we try to solve the question, we get lost in the phase of searching for an answer, and we keep on questioning. As long as we are trapped within this loop, we will be the slaves to our own will to find the so-called truth.

In the film *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, the most powerful computer, after years of processing, finally arrives at the answer to the question: "What is the meaning of life?" "42," it replies. This ambivalent, odd answer can only mean that the author of the novel on which the film is based, Douglas Adams, believes that the reply to the question is: there can be no answer. Maybe "no answer" is the best response to such a question, even though its ambiguity points to why we continue to search for answers and uncover new truths at all.

But as Lewis Thomas implies in "The Corner of the Eye," the reason why computers cannot replace us is that "they are not designed, as we are, for ambiguity" (55). Thomas believes that human beings are unique because of our intuitive thought processes, and thus we could never be copied by machines. However, even this could be put into question. Can we be so sure that we, humans, are not designed in a similar way to computers? We have already found out that our brain controls our body through instructions carried by electrical signals, just like computers. If we pursue this line of thinking further, the so-called ambiguity, or intuition, may be due to illusions originating in the complex calculations of our brains.

And yet scientists declare that our human brains are less capable of calculating numbers because we are more adroit at abstract calculation. That is, our brains are much more powerful than any computer in the world, since we think in multiple dimensions rather than following the rule of the repetition of "0" and "1." Nevertheless, such abstract thinking is the cause of uncertainty. Since we carry abstract thoughts in our brain, we wonder, we feel curious, we have emotions, and we make mistakes. We shout, scream, laugh, and cry, and we experience happiness and sorrow. Because of the uncertainty of being human, there is no unity in our mind. We see differently, and we think differently. When we confront any event in life, we will not simply experience one emotion, but we will feel dozens of them, mixed up, enchanting our mind. And, because we are engulfed by such mixed up feelings from time to time, we often feel confused.

I still cannot get rid of that horrible feeling I experienced from attending my great grandma's funeral. When I walked by the coffin, when I truly realized that this was the last time I would see her, when it came time to cremate her, and my grandma knelt down, crying to the point of unconsciousness, I could not help shedding tears and trembling. We are all told that we will pass away one day, so we comfort ourselves by saying that death is just a natural process. However, when it really strikes you, do you still think it is just a natural process?

According to statistics, about two people die every second. But, when we look further, the number increases to 106 people per minute, 6,360 people per hour, 152,640 people per day, and 55,713,660 people per year. Once you feel the momentum of that increasing number, don't you feel helpless?

Everyone is afraid of death, because death brings pain to those people struggling before death and to those who love the ones who are dying. When we consider this fear in light of the fact that even scientists, who have devoted thousands of years to establishing a system for decoding final answers to the formation of life, have not come to a conclusion, then no wonder we are not certain about life, no wonder we are afraid of death, and no wonder we cannot find an answer to everything.

However, is this the end of the long journey of science? Is this the end of the faith we put into the beautiful, philosophical dream of explaining everything in the world with a unified principle? Is this the end of our pursuit to understand everything in the world and to Lewis Thomas's beautiful ambiguity that makes us into these creative creatures who long to know and do more? If so, why are scientists still exerting their efforts to dig the truth out of the universe? Why are people still so insistent on finding more, even when they are told that there is no hope in front of them? What is it about science that keeps humans moving forward?

I once asked my father why he chose to study physics as a major and why he is so committed to science. He told me that he was forced to. Back in his childhood, when he was playing outside one day, he saw a high voltage electric box near the road, but he did not know what it was and used his hands to open the box, out of curiosity. All of a sudden, he felt a burst of pain and lost consciousness, receiving a near-fatal electric shock. "I was saved by my neighbor, who happened to pass by, but that pain," said my father, "made me so horrified, and I realized I knew too little about the world, about nature and everything. In order to get rid of the fear, I forced myself to learn more about nature, and learn more about science. And the more I read, the more I found science fascinating. I felt that I was not afraid of anything in the world because science offered me a way of thinking about everything that happens in the world in a rational way. And I think that this is the charm of science." A sense of comfort and security: perhaps that is what science offers to people, and maybe this is why people are still committed to the search for a certain truth.

At key moments, we are made aware that we know too little about the world. People, compared to the universe that we have discovered, are too small. Mysteries have no limit. As long as we keep searching, there will be

more questions than answers. Yet, this is the compelling part of science: that there is always something we do not understand in the world, and we enjoy the process of unraveling the truth. Science, to some extent, then, serves as more than a tool we humans use to analyze the world; it serves as a painkiller, offering us comfort for the questions we all carry. Just as my father told me, the reason why we are still afraid of death is that we do not know enough. Can I stand the pain when I die? What will happen afterwards? Will I be punished or stay in hell? Will there be nothing after death? As we have these thoughts, ignorance and uncertainty occupy our souls, which results in fear. So, that is why science retains its value. Maybe we do not know the truth about death, but who dares to say there will not be a time when we finally uncover the truth? And perhaps the universe is an accident: but, as even Lightman admits, this is just a theory. And who's to say that we will not, one day, uncover a new theory?

It seems that we have been lost on the path of finding who we are, where we are from, and where should we go. These seemingly sophisticated questions indeed convey the forms of curiosity we humans are born to have. Admittedly, there will be confusion and discouragement along the way to finding the truth, but these burdens we carry should be transferred into a much more solid faith in searching for the true meaning of life, the universe, and everything. As Thomas reveals in his essay, no one can ever deny our species' great accomplishment of creating astonishing civilizations, and such accomplishments have been built from the ambiguity and uncertainty that humans experience. Because of this ambiguity, we feel confused, and we are curious about everything that happens in the world; thus, we keep on searching, even when doing so seems like futile work. If, at the end, the truth is harsh, so what? We have already been on the long journey of discovery, and we feel satisfied on the way because we enjoy the process of decoding mysteries. And truth is within our reach, from time to time.

Carrying the urn, my father keeps going towards the cemetery. At the graveyard we picked for my great grandmother, we bury the urn in the soil, so that it accompanies my great grand father's grave. A somber dirge goes on flowing in the air.

Five years later, I stand again in the same place, facing my great -grandmother's grave. People say that time cures all pain. It is true, because we real-

ize that there are some truths we are not able to change, and all we can do is accept them, trying to move forward. We are all lost at some time and at some place, but as long as we keep going, our confusion and sorrow will subside, and we will see the return of the wonder of life from the corner of our eye.

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