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Although I hate to admit it, Soren Kierkegaard’s *The Present Age* has become one of my favorite books of the semester. In the very beginning of the text, Kierkegaard writes, “Our age is essentially one of understanding and reflection, without passion, momentarily bursting into enthusiasm, and shrewdly relapsing into repose” (33). I certainly didn’t realize it at the time when I was writing my mid-term paper, but Kierkegaard’s opening words echo the discontent of all the beginning authors: we are products of a passionless society, offspring of a culture without meaning. However, within humanity, there are certain aspects just waiting to be set free. Thus, I set out, with some inadequacy, to describe the authors’ portrayal of the shortcomings in our worlds, and for some, explanations of how to correct our seemingly empty, meaningless lives.

Kierkegaard’s view, that our inactive, passionless age is a direct byproduct of endless inward reflection, presents both the most seemingly pessimistic and optimistic views of the collection. His process of leveling, or “the self-combustion of the human race”, is an inescapable construct that loses the identity of the individual (56). Although such a process would seemingly have no escape, Kierkegaard also asserts that genuine Christianity can provide the leap from leveling into serving the world indirectly through suffering (83). In a similar fashion, Dorothy Sayers relies on God to be the discussion of the majority of her text, *The Mind of the Maker*. Sayers asserts that we are all artists or creators, like God the creator, when we are engaged in a creative act, we “cannot yet see the finished results” (59). Although in my paper I harped mainly on Sayers’ depiction of the downfall of man through his stupidity as mentioned in her prologue and the fact that I refused to believe that all men could identify with the “artist” metaphor, I have since come to understand that her intentions were to assert that we are all creators who can only understand the metaphor of God through tangible examples.

Ortega and Silko both emphasize the importance of human history in their respective texts. Silko’s respect to human history is an overwhelming trait of her story, entitled, *Storyteller*. Showing the importance of Laguna culture when contrasted with the modernization of written narratives, Silko acknowledges that in Laguna culture, there wasn’t an immense amount of questioning, and although most of the stories ended on a depressing note, there just were no explanations (42). Although Ortega does not describe a certain kind of history, he believes that man is a bundle of experience, creating a history in every single moment (153). Matthew Gladwell also finds comfort in human history in his book, *The Tipping Point*. However, rather than using the system of language, Gladwell uses the history of statistics, asserting various points at which fads and societal moves occur (259). Finally, Michael Ignatieff’s *The Needs of Strangers* explores the idea that our language is no longer sufficient to describing our needs, which Ignatieff believes to be fraternity, love, belonging, dignity, and respect (13). Thus, Kierkegaard’s opening statement rings true throughout all of the beginning texts: with lost meaning in language, human history, and predictability. However, on the opposite spectrum are the texts from this semester. Certainly, each text continues in exploring discontent with the current world, but in a much different way: rather than trying to pinpoint the downfall of humanity, these authors have submitted texts that explore a certain aspect of the most innate needs of humanity.

Matt Ridley was the first to explore the needs of humanity in his book, *The Origins of Virtue*. However, I would be fooling myself if I didn’t acknowledge the fact that I had trouble with his text. Unlike any before him, Ridley approached humanity as an economist, a scientist, and an empiricist. Although Gladwell used psychology and cultural trends to explain society, no author could really parallel the approach that Ridley used. So, I was taken aback, but as I continued to read I identified with Ridley’s view that human beings are selfish, in our genes, in our interactions, and in our existence. Our genes are “selfish” because their most basic existence is built on the idea that things are the way they are in order to enhance the chances of “surviving and replicating” (18). Certainly, Ridley doesn’t use the traditional sense of the word “selfish” (a manipulation of language which I would assert would be to the dismay of earlier authors), but rather, to state that genes exist only to recreate and flourish. However, if our most basic workings are only operating for the sake of themselves, why do things like the division of labor, supply and demand, and almost all other functions of successful society exist? Thus, Ridley attempts, and with immense success, to answer the question, “If life is a competitive struggle, why is there so much cooperation?” (5).

Although most of the book’s text is determined by the fact that we are “selfish”, Ridley’s proposed question also presents a bit of a contradiction. However, we are living contradictions, Ridley states, and although “our minds have been built by selfish genes…they have been built to be social, trustworthy, and cooperative” (249). In this statement lies the key to most of Ridley’s argument: although our genes flourish in the traditional sense of evolution, our methods of interaction also develop in accord to how successful the product of the interaction may be. Of course, this is to assert that the reader would have to have some faith (pun unintended) in the fact that natural selection and evolution have some place in society. Ridley’s evolutionary voice is hard to hide, and in all honesty, he doesn’t really try: he points to Darwin, the father of evolution, and Dawkins, one of history’s greatest skeptics, on page 19 when quoting Dawkins himself, who once said, “we are survival machines- robot vehicles blindly programmed to preserve the selfish molecules known as genes.” Ridley’s main point, however, is not to prove that evolution exists, but that our selfishness is manifest in all forms of our social and economic lives, mainly seen in the division of labor (39).

Finally, Ridley believes that the main problem of the human condition lies in the fact that human beings cannot readily accept their true natures and would rather accept the idea that we are selfless, overwhelmingly nice, shiny, bright individuals (261). For example, even though we like to depict the native people of our world as devote conservationists in tune with mother nature, the Native Americans actually exploited larger groups of animals because they had no connection between their hunting and population numbers of game (217). We were selfish then, we will be selfish in the future, and we are selfish now: it’s in our genes after all! This is not to say that we are malevolent people, as Ridley asserts earlier in his text that we are all searching for the greater good (38). However, because the face of our identity has been so manipulated by history, the government has claimed its place as imposing the “original virtue” of the market place which has made it even more corrupt (262). Rather than posing a solution, the government has become the problem, and in order to return to the most innate and successful social order, man must submit to “devolution”, or return to small and local government in order to ensure that our needs for harmony and virtue are met (264).

In complete contrast to what Capon later asserts, Berry’s article, “Hell Hath No Limits”, implies that we are hindered by our sense of limitlessness, and that we continue “consuming, spending, wasting, and driving…at any cost to anything and everybody but ourselves” (1). Because we are so consumed with ourselves, we fail to see that the world itself actually has limits that we cannot escape. In contrast to Ridley’s view of economics, Berry does not see greed as a motivating factor, but rather, as something that greatly hurts our ecological sustainability (1). Like earlier authors, Berry attributes our dislike of traditional limits to confusion in language: we confuse “limits” with “confinement” (5). Finally, Berry identifies with Ridley in the fact that he believes we have to readily accept that we are what we are, we are not greater than anything, and we must work to “devolutionize” in order to hold on to what we have been given (6).

Next lies Margaret Edson’s text, *Wit*, which shows what happens when we let our notions of how we’d like to exist get in the way of what we need to exist. A professor of John Donne at the collegiate level, Edson’s central character named Vivian Bearing serves as one of the most notorious and unforgiving professors on campus (59). Bearing is completely inaccessible: her emotions, her relationships, her knowledge, all completely in control and never changing. However, she is forced to deal with the one trait that makes us all human: death. Because we all die, we all regress, and we revert back to the way we entered this world, wanting and demanding our most innate and basic needs, namely, that of love and compassion. The regression doesn’t come so easily for Bearing, and for most of the play, she fights it off. When she was first diagnosed with Stage 4 Ovarian Cancer, the eventual cause of her death, Bearing does not cry or yell out for God’s forgiveness, but rather, plays games with the words of the doctor, using her background in language to define all the medical terms (9). Even as her health deteriorates, Bearing’s supreme wit is still present. In one scene, she imagines the kind of delight her colleagues would have if she really did “barf her brains out” at the hand of chemotherapy treatments (28). Thus, Edson asserts that as we lose ourselves in the confines of empty passions and submit to competition, we lose our sense of what we really need, and often, what we need can only be found at the most drastic times.

Edson makes no debate in assuming that love is the most basic human necessity. In one of the most gripping scenes between Bearing and her mentor, E. M. Ashford, Bearing is incredibly close to death, and rather than hearing the sonnets of John Donne around which she has formed her life, she requests that Ashford read a lovely little allegory entitled, *The Runaway Bunny*, which presents a tale of a mother’s omnipresent love for her child (62). Although, without any family and only one character that cares enough to stop by, the question comes to mind: who is the mother bunny when Bearing is the child? Obviously, the idea of God as the mother bunny cannot be ignored. Bearing, lost in her studies, becomes found through God’s grace in the afterlife. This is especially depicted in the final scene, where Bearing rises naked after her death to a bright, white light (66). The scene stands in stark resemblance to that of Jesus’ ascension in the Bible. Edson was clearly not trying to state that Bearing was Jesus incarnate, but rather, that we all have the same aim and are all God’s children. Of course, this assumption is not strict, as the reader could see a secular meaning of going to death the same way we emerged into life: naked. Regardless of its religious content, *Wit* still stands a testament that no matter how human beings chose to exist, they are limited by their most definitive unifying factor: death.

In the same way that Bearing ceases to know her most human qualities to become robot-like when she gets absorbed in her work, Philip K. Dick creates a story of actual androids, who are in such complete control over themselves there is only one defining human quality: empathy. In his novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, the post-apocalyptic world is an incredibly dreary one: most people have emigrated to Mars, leaving only the “specials”, the elderly, and those with earthly responsibility behind (9). Rick Deckard is a man stuck in the last category: as a bounty hunter who searches for androids to “retire” them, he is stuck on earth to save the population from the deadly breed of robots (29). However, in 2021, the technology is so advanced that the only way to detect if the androids are human or not is to register a Voigt Empathy Test, which asks the subject a variety of questions, often related to the most precious things on earth: real, living animals (29). Dick’s entire text is controlled by the notion that empathy is the most universal trait. However, one would have to assume that everyone poses this understanding. Aside from children in the preoperational and egotistical stage of development and those with social disorders, it’s generally true: people are encouraged to understand one another through identifying with each other’s situations. In one case, Deckard is almost fooled by the android Rachael; but luckily, he catches her at the very last minute when posing a question about “babyhide” (59). The only fault of the androids was this obvious lack of empathy, however, human beings are limited by our endless faults. Thus, Dick asserts that the human condition is constantly swayed by our faults, such as Deckard’s inability to readily kill the androids (137). However, in the same way, when we find things to be truly passionate about is when we can overcome our faults. For example, at the end of the book, Deckard is able to overcome the fact that he has killed six androids in twenty-four hours and his contemplation of suicide after he discovers what he believes to be a genuine life form in that of a toad (236). All Deckard ever wanted was a living animal, and his complete and utter happiness at his discovery was enough to send him back into the arms of his wife. Deckard’s passion was life, and as abstract of a notion as that may be, it governed his entire active existence.

The final book, entitled *Between Noon and Three* by Robert Capon, believes in passion in life, but not one that is so easily accessible like Deckard’s passion about life. Rather, Capon’s passion comes to fruition in the ever-accepting presence of God’s Grace through a scandalous parable about an affair. Right off the bat, Capon asserts his central theme about the human condition: we are dead. Not “dead” in the traditional sense, but rather, that we were created without soul, and through God’s grace we are constantly refilled with love and meaning for existence (292). However complex this idea might be, it really comes to complete understanding when put in terms of love lost: when Paul, the main character of the parable, loses love in a former flame, he becomes dead because his original devotion can never be replaced (56). Through the love of a new mate, named Laura, he finds a completely new and replenished self, not the old Paul, but rather a revitalized version filled with new life and love (56). God works the same way: though we are dead, his love and grace continue to create us. Occasionally, Capon assumes that the reader is familiar with traditional Christian parables such as that of the Prodigal Son, Job, and the Good Samaritan. Capon also asserts that the reader can identify with Luther’s view that God’s grace is given despite what we do on Earth (109). Regardless of the reader’s experience with Western Religion, Capon makes it clear that God’s grace is all we need to be set free and forgiven, and, we already have it. His main question becomes, “You are free. What do you plan to do?” (113). In this question lies Capon’s main assertion on the state of the human condition. We have become so confused by the prospects of hell, sin, and the law that we fail to see the honest and bright truth: since God’s grace will never stop, no longer should we concern ourselves with the problems of modern Christianity and instead, just accept the fact that God has set us free (294).

From all my admissions, my term paper could easily turn from a presentation on texts to a straight confessional. However, I accept the fact that I am a subjective being and cannot process anything without the shade of my own individual rose-colored lens, and I take no qualms in admitting my downfalls. Thus, the most compelling book to me has come as a result of my own inner conflict with religion. For my entire life, I have sat in the seat of an Evangelical Lutheran Church. Although Martin Luther asserted that there is nothing you can do to get God’s grace because through faith it is given to you, the social constructs of the church just didn’t make sense to me in this light. How on earth could the church preach of eternal and ever-loving grace when inactivity in the church was frowned upon and society and culture kept making its way into the forefront of the church? I believe I’m just as much of a Christian in the church as I am at home, and if I am truly abiding by God’s law, you probably wouldn’t even think me to be a Christian, rather, just a good person. Eventually, I lost the light of God’s grace and chose apathy rather than what I felt to be fake conviction. However, after reading Capon’s book, I began to identify a little more with the faith I had begun to despise. Capon reconnected me to the Luther’s original notion and the one my church was built on: no matter how far you stray, God’s grace will never leave you (292). Capon also proposes a radical, almost sacrilegious, parable, but as someone who is often sacrilegious herself, it spoke to me more than any Bible verse has in a long time. Capon also identified with me in the fact that religion is corrupt, as on page 284, he proclaims that “church is not in the religion business; it’s in the Gospel-proclaiming business.” However, there are strides for the better that Capon’s book made me realize. Just recently, there has been an immense amount of conflict over the ELCA’s decision to allow homosexuals to be ordained. However, if these Lutherans were to take a look back at Luther’s original intent, all the more strengthened by Capon’s book, everyone is accepted in God’s grace, which means men, women, and homosexuals (because, and I joke, Lord knows they need their own category). Of course, such a decision by the assembly made me proud to be a Lutheran because it asserted the point that Capon tried so hard to make: God’s grace is incomprehensible, so stop trying to understand it and just accept that you are loved (291). Although Capon’s view may not have changed my entire worldview, it certainly did help me to reconnect with the faith that I thought I had lost.

All of the texts provided me with brilliant examples of human traits, however, from the view of presenting new information alone, I would have to state that Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* presented the least compelling narrative. I thoroughly enjoyed Dick’s story and found his argument for humanity in terms of empathy to be fascinating, but when compared with Capon and Ridley, it manages to seem much more like a fun science-fiction novel than a statement on human character. I suppose even more surprisingly lies the fact that Dick’s novel was my favorite out of the entire semester, and I shared that excitement with more people than I care to admit. Again, however, I must attribute my ranking of the books to my own personal interests, and because I have found both *Blade Runner* and Dick’s philosophical ideas to be enjoyable, I read the novel on that same plain of enjoyment. So, rather than finding it a gripping testament of human nature, I found it a pleasurable experience, because, quite plainly, I love science fiction.

Despite all my references to self and individual interest, the question still remains: is it possible to be an individual at all in this day and age? It can be done, but it’s hard, probably harder than ever before. I’ve stated in my mid-term paper just how hard individualism can be: after all, we live in a world of 6.6 billion people that is always expanding and it’s impossible not to become a statistic in some manifestation. I am white, I am female, I am Lutheran, I live in North Carolina: virtually every part of me is just waiting to be classified into some subgroup. However, like Capon and Kierkegaard assert, we are free through God, so why waste time being concerned with the limitations of society when we are already granted something that transcends it? Freedom allows you to explore life, and in this life you can only really live when you find something to be passionate about. Without genuine passion there really is no reason for living. Deckard found his passion in life; Kierkegaard through God; Bearing through Donne; DeeDee Gordon from Gladwell’s *The Tipping Point* through style. All of these people, however, found comfort in the fact that they were genuinely good, or genuinely enjoyed, what they were doing. With doubt, it is impossible to be an individual. Like Kierkegaard writes, reflection is the end of passion. However, there is a line between being genuinely good at something and becoming lost in the success: Bearing, for example, stopped being a relatable human being when she stopped enjoying Donne and submitted to the competition of intelligence. To be an individual, you cannot submit to any kind of race or war, because it immediately forgoes the self for a statistical race.

Admittedly, however, you have to be smart. Ridley’s text lies in the assumption that the competitive and selfish genes, the smart genes, have won out. However, people are still ignorant, lazy, stupid, and insane. On the other hand, you have geniuses that will always outwit and outplace the average individual. Here lies the key: to be an individual in our age is to be comfortable enough with the self to know that although you may not be the best, you try your best. You can only try to be the best bounty hunter, Christian, teacher, or economist that you can be. Like religion, passion is relative and subjective, and although some might dispute it as “ignorance being bliss”, it really is a matter of the individual. I live my life according to passion, and if I don’t want to do something, I try to avoid it. Obviously, there are certain cultural expectations I have to do, and of course, I am constantly hindered by the fact that someone out there is smarter than me, more talented than me, and better looking than me. However, I’ve been given the cards I’ve been given, so there is no need to sit and harp. The people I look up to most are the people who, no matter what situation they are in, make the best of it. To me, this is the essence of being an individual: someone living for the day and trying to live an active, passionate life. Thus, I leave you where I started, with a quote from Kierkegaard: “Our age is essentially one of understanding and reflection, without passion, momentarily bursting into enthusiasm, and shrewdly relapsing into repose” (33). However, with hope from even Kierkegaard himself, with passion, man can do anything.