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Introduction

Currently we have a global pandemic gripping the nation. We have entered a new way of life adapting to being confined to our homes. Many believe the corona-virus is nothing more than the flu, they ignore social distancing laws and protest. Throughout this proposal, I will be exploring fear, what constitutes a meaningful life and extinction. What if a cataclysmic event was upon us, could we work together as a species to survive? If we could, do we even deserve to?

Fear

"Fear is our most primal emotion. Evolution has wired our nervous system in such a way that intense fear takes precedence over everything else in our minds and bodies" (Dozier, 1998). Fear is crucial in enabling species to survive the dangers around them. The expression of fear in the modern world still serves a purpose but it can also take its form in anxieties. Fear is now embedded into everyday life so much so that it is hard to avoid watching or reading another news article of the next big threat.

Global pandemics have highlighted the prevalence of fear in society. Helsloot (2012) states that "In 2003-2004 the SARS out-break in China and Canada demonstrated just how far and how fast epidemics can travel. Since then, pandemics, including the Avian flu and the H1N1 flu, have challenged governments and have provoked public anxiety." I will discuss how fear and anxiety merge together when faced with global threats. Threats such as these showcase how we have no control. This is a stark reminder that we should change and adapt but we also fear change. This is reinforced by Salecl (2004), "When The New York Times reported that in the US "fear is spreading faster than SARS" and that people are as a result massively avoiding Chinese restaurants, it concluded: 'The biggest problem is the unknown'. I will explain that out of fear, more than protection, we build weapons of mass destruction but these arms cannot fight an invisible enemy. These weapons fail to defend us against bacteria and viruses. Fear often leads to blame and hate, such as Trump's "Chinese Virus" statement, rather than action towards positive change.

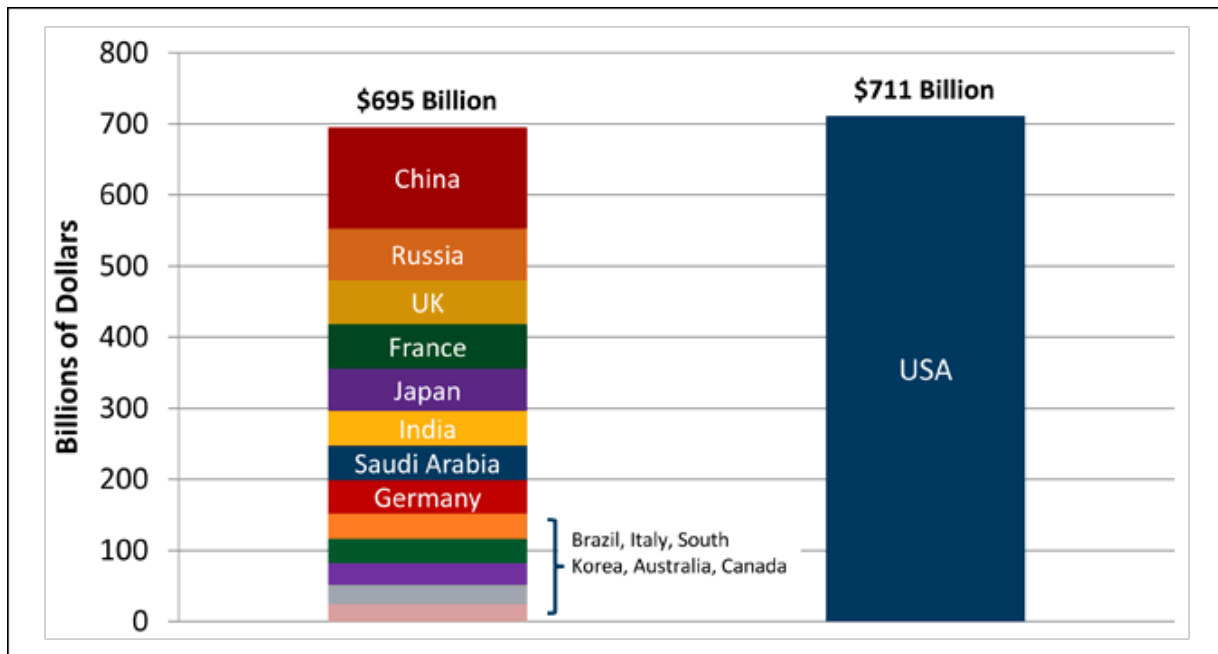


Figure 1, (U.S. DEFENSE SPENDING COMPARED TO OTHER COUNTRIES, 2019)

Figure 1 demonstrates how much is spent by the USA in comparison to the rest of the world. This shows how self-destructive we are as a species; rather than investing money on the conservation of humankind, we invest on killing one another.

"If you plant a seed in the ground and water it every day, it starts to grow towards the surface. If you don't know and trust that this seed is growing, you will doubt whether anything at all is happening underneath the surface. You may start to say: "I don't believe in this! I water this piece of ground every day but I never see any results for all my hard work!" (Fox, 2011). Fox's analogy emphasises that saving ourselves from extinction will not happen overnight. This will take a committed effort from everyone to build a better future. People tend to ignore action that results in long term benefits and, out of fear, avoid reading about what state they will leave the planet in. Berners-Lee (2019) suggests that "If you want the best for your kids, the way you go about it is not at the expense of other people's kids." I will use this as an example of what is needed for change to happen. This is supported by Pleasants (2009) who stated that "Individually and together we can make the difference needed to return the Earth to a healthier and better place for us, our children and their children". You must cater your decisions to people around you, including people you do not know. Fear is universal and there is a growing sense of eco-anxiety. This can be alleviated by everyone doing their bit; unifying their fears to preserve humanity as a whole.

“An increasing number of careful studies on how the actual fear of death develops in the child agree fairly well that the child has no knowledge of death until about the age of three to five” (Becker, 1973). Although we are not born with fear, this influences our decisions as we mature. Children see the world with a unique perspective, without the respect for survival or profit. When this is how we start to see the world, life is that little bit less meaningful. Dawkins (2016) theorises that “We are going to die, and that makes us the lucky ones. Most people are never going to die because they are never going to be born.” This powerful statement is a counter argument to the fear of death. Acceptance of death can be liberating because life itself is a gift.

Meaningful Life

“Plato's radical and unheard of notion of an immaterial soul that was separate from the physical body (in fact, not only was it considered separate, but Plato saw it as being trapped by the physical body, as a bird is trapped in a cage) would necessitate that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam create a place to put this pesky, eternal soul” (Kardaras, 2011). Many people find meaning in religion, they go to church because God guides them on their path and gives meaning to their lives. They try to be ‘good’ and avoid committing sins not because they are wrong, but because there is a penalty (hell) if they choose to commit them. Plato’s belief in the soul being ‘trapped’ by the body encouraged people to believe in gods as it gave meaning to their life – their soul was trapped by the body could be embraced by religion.

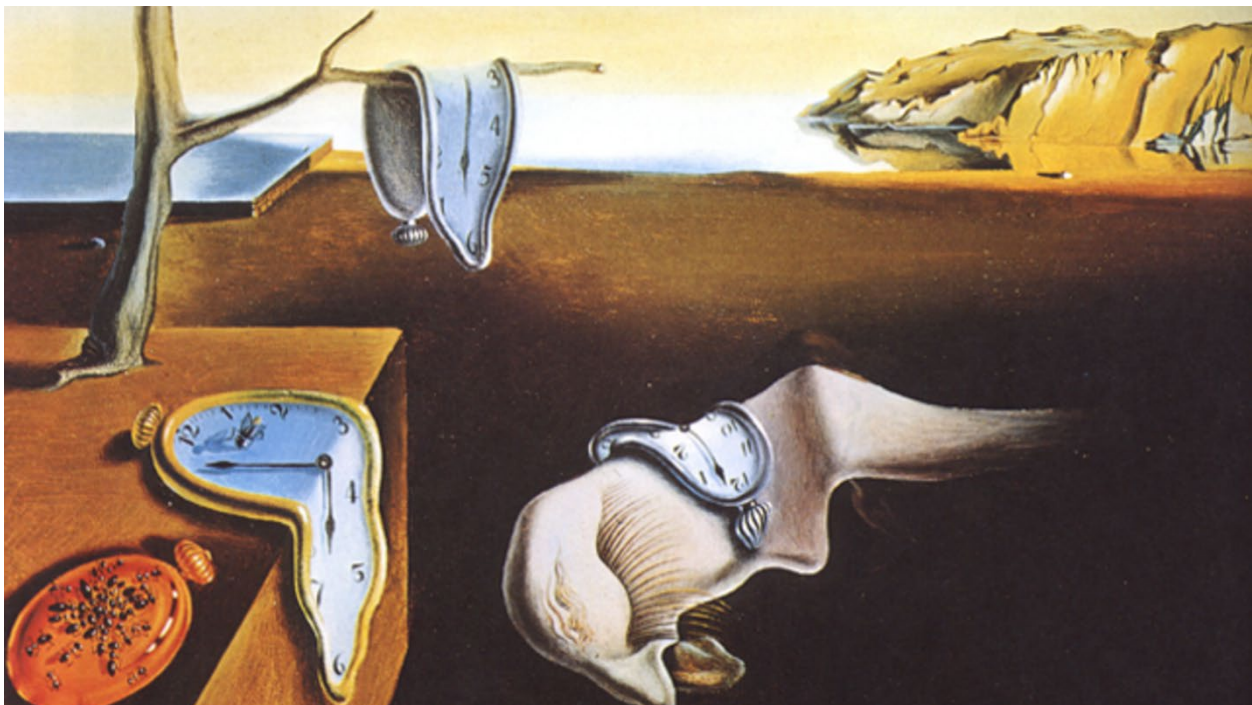


Figure 2, The Persistence of Memory (Dalí, 1931)

Another interesting concept described by Haney and Kline (2010) is that we are “Caught up in clock-time, we are entranced and captivated by the immediacy of the “present,” by the latest distractions, gossip, and consumer products, leaving us in a state of, what Heidegger calls, “limbo.” Adults have a warped perception of life. They prioritise how they are perceived by others rather than looking after themselves, as that perception is what gives them purpose. If everyone solely used their money for survival, without looking for their next purchase, that would be an abundance of time saved.

Many people go through life ignoring death. Ignorance of death is a coping mechanism; a way to deal with answers we do not like. Liebman (1994) states that “I often feel that death is not the enemy of life, but its friend; for it is the knowledge that our years are limited which makes them so precious”. This suggests that the ignorance of death is counterproductive as knowledge and acceptance of death encourages people to value their lives.

We are all under the delusion that we may not die when the time comes. Humans have always been obsessed with the idea of life extension. This is reinforced by Becker (1973) who said “Therefore in normal times we move about actually without ever believing in our own death, as if we fully believed in our own corporeal immortality. We are intent on mastering death”. The study by Neugarten (1978) demonstrates the vast investment of time and resources into life extension. Science hopes to develop a way in which humans can extend their lifespan and delay their inevitable death. The question must be asked if the extension of a person’s lifespan would bring any positive benefit, if they are not living a purposeful or enjoyable life? “There are two kinds of regimes that do extend life for experimental animals by decreasing the rate of ageing and that do therefore extend their maximum lifespans. The first is by restricting the food of rats and mice to the point of slowing down the animals’ activity; the second is by reducing the body temperature of coldblooded species, insects, and fish.”

“I do not want to die - no, I neither want to die nor do I want to want to die; I want to live for ever and ever and ever. I want this 'I' to live- this poor 'I' that I am and that I feel myself to be here and now, and therefore the problem of the duration- of my soul, of my own soul, tortures me”. Unamuno (1972) reminds people of mortality, something we all know but we try to suppress. Living forever would be a terrible thing, the world would become overpopulated. We are born into a society that teaches us throughout our lives that to die, is, total darkness, the end. We dress in black and cry because someone has died, we cry because we will miss them when we should be celebrating how they have lived.

“The irony of man's condition is that the deepest need is to be free of the anxiety of death and annihilation; but it is life itself which awakens it, and so we must shrink from being fully alive.” (Becker, 1973) highlights that rather than thinking we have a right to our existence, it should be viewed as a gift, not a given.

Extinction

The National Research Council (1995) explains that “Fossil records from nearly any geological age reveal two types of extinction: extinction without replacement ("dead-end") and what might be called "chronologic extinction" or "taxonomic extinction." The first type of extinction, which I will not be discussing, is the evolution of a species progressing to the stage where it is considered to be an entirely different species, for example: the Neanderthals to the homo-sapiens. The other type is the species becoming totally extinct, which could occur as a result of many different types of events.

“At least a handful of times in the last 500 million years, 75 to more than 90 percent of all species on Earth have disappeared in a geological blink of an eye in catastrophes we call mass extinctions” (GRESHKO, 2019). I will use these figures to highlight that, throughout history, extinctions are a common occurrence. This is an unescapable truth of life. Throughout this section of the proposal, I will be reflecting on the huge amount of species which have gone extinct and, if we are not careful, we may meet the same demise.

“In the last half-billion years, life on Earth has been nearly wiped out five times—by such things as climate change, an intense ice age, volcanoes, and that space rock that smashed into the Gulf of Mexico 65 million years ago, obliterating the dinosaurs and a bunch of other species. These events are known as the Big Five mass extinctions, and all signs suggest we are now on the precipice of a sixth” (Drake, 2015). Drake discusses the Big Five extinctions listed which could not be controlled or avoided as they were a result of natural phenomenon. However, there are things we can control, on a smaller scale: our influence on the environment, including other animals and plants, in order to reduce their likelihood of extinction. With the sixth ‘big extinction’ on the horizon, humans must find a way to prolong its arrival.

Schweiger (2016) highlights that “Several published scientific studies warn that misdirected human activities are impoverishing ecosystems around the world and, when coupled with global warming, could lead to nearly a million extinctions by 2050.” This quote demonstrates the influence humans have on the planet in relation to extinction rates and how homo-sapiens have abused the environment. We have accelerated the decline of a large

number of species.



Figure 3, A protester carries a weapon Thursday at the state Capitol in Lansing, Michigan. (Sancya, 2020)

Figure 3 shows an American citizen protesting the coronavirus lockdown measures. They believe it is their constitutional right and it is breaching their declaration of independence. This goes to show that, despite us being in a life-threatening pandemic, the unwillingness of humans to adapt and change.

“By showing us that major changes in behaviour are possible, the pandemic might help point the way to saving the planet” (Smith, 2020). This quote reflects that, despite some of these particular groups of people and some country’s delayed response to the urgency to lockdown, the majority of people are staying at home. This shows that in austerity, we are able to work together to improve the situation. Moving forward, could the initiatives we have learned stop climate change or the extinction of animals? The idea of going back to ‘normal’ must be adapted as this should be a turning point towards making a better world.

Maynard Smith (1993) discusses natural selection by explaining that “Some individuals will be better than others at catching food or escaping from predators, at finding mates or at raising their offspring.” We can apply the quote above to the coronavirus pandemic because we are seeing a larger death toll in poorer areas. One of the primary reasons for this is the lack of effective universal healthcare. Despite being more evolved, this quote shows that we are not that different to any other animal. We are smarter – we could make the Earth a more habitable environment for every species, but we live in the present, and that will be our downfall.

Conclusion

Fear is a motivating emotion that, in many ways, we owe our lives to. We must harness this emotion for the betterment of the world we live in. Rather than investing huge amounts of time and resourcing into military protection, it should be focused towards preserving and conserving the earth. This will allow future generations to enjoy the same liberties we take for granted in our current society. However, this will absolutely require a committed effort from all individuals for real change to occur.

People often try to find meaning for their life in religion, it gives them hope that there may be life after death. Alternatively, they ignore their death because they cannot imagine it and are, somewhat, under the impression that it somehow will not happen to them. Instead, they focus on the perception of themselves from other people. It can be argued that accepting death is the only way to truly derive meaning from life. Despite this, humanity is continually striving to find a ‘cure’ to prolong life.

It is suggested that we are progressing towards a sixth mass extinction and it is clear that humans have a significant impact on the acceleration of species decline and extinction. The coronavirus protests highlight that some of the population will not support positive action which would spare the lives of many. Hope can be found in the knowledge of the many people supporting the cause to prevent the spread of this viral pandemic.

“If we knew that humanity would become extinct within the next few months, then we would be justified in feeling distressed about this because it would cut short our expected life span, thereby depriving us of many potential experiences. However, should we feel anguish about the possibility that humankind will become extinct long after we and our loved ones have died?” (TRISEL, 2004). Our fear is that we are going to die, but we only care about our

own death. A meaningful life would revolve around looking beyond the present and towards future generations. Not so they could have the same quality of life as modern-day society, rather a more successful existence.

Throughout this proposal, I have looked at fear and the fear of death, what constitutes a meaningful life, and the ominous threat of extinction. These topics, together, prompt the question: 'Does extinction really matter?'.

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