

## Understanding Mortality

We are all going to die but this is what makes us lucky. There are people who will never die because they will never be born. But here we are, the privileged few out of the infinite souls in the universe, born as humans on a little planet like this. How lucky is it to live and have lived.

I consider myself even more lucky. I've read Shakespeare, Milton, and Virgil (in original Latin), listened to Beethoven, Bach, and Chopin, visited three continents, learned all the programming languages invented in Bell Labs, and wrote 167 essays while in college. To die at age 20 with the experiences I've had is not a tragedy at all but a miracle.

Yet, people always lament "If only Mozart lived beyond 30, what more masterpieces we could experience" or "If only Lincoln was not assassinated, what conclusion to segregation could America finally become," and the like. The tragedy has always been what more the living could have done with a few more months, a few more years, a few more decades, a few more living.

And so it has now come to this.

The 86,736 if-onyms since January 2020.

In the year of coronavirus, as our only physical contacts become our very phones and computers and our only source of knowledge becomes the websites pinged along by clients and servers held together by the magic of WiFi, we wonder whether our lives will ever be the same again, but as

doubt and uncertainty crystallizes into a present reality, we ultimately find ourselves asking the eternal question – what does it mean to be a human being.

To be a human being now means living digitally. It means having at least one email account, and getting most communication done using email. It means having a face-to-face conversation with a machine as a middleman – Zoom, Messenger, WeChat, et al. It means owning at least one computer and one smartphone. It means not touching physical cash in a month and making most purchases on Amazon. It means Microsoft Word and Excel – lots of it. And it means seeing Google every day.

This digital existence is the most vanilla definition of what it means to be human right now, today, at this very moment, and it is very much where we will continue to head post-covid. It is neither all good nor is it all bad, it just is, as the Daoist in me is to remark. We spend a lot of time typing furiously at our keyboards, exponentiating the amount of words we can express online, but all the normative debates these days ring hollow because it doesn't resonate with the eternal question – what does it mean to be a human being.

So let us attempt to answer it by first acknowledging that the lives we live are digital. Yes, we will probably have met our future spouse using a dating app. Yes, we will probably get more screen time with search engines than with our kids. Yes, future people will probably remember us by our Tweets upon our death (and a few YouTube videos if we get famous). To acknowledge our digital lives is to acknowledge all of this.

Surely there is more (to all this)? And, what does it mean for 86,736 people to die and for me to continue living like this (digitally)?

Therein lies the rub.