

2016 Ready Writing  
1A Champion

“The Important of Being Brilliant”

During the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, a new form of philosophy was on the rise.

Enlightenment thinking, full of optimism and liberated from the stuffy confines of academia, dominated writing. The philosophy promoted individuality, eccentricity, curiosity, and the human spirit, and viewed the majority as mediocre, following the masses. Those that explored their potential and became individuals possessed, in the Enlightenment view, a wonderful sort of genius. It is true that eccentricity is a form of its own brilliance, spanning pursuits like science, art, and politics. However, this does not mean that those who are not “great minds” are not geniuses – brilliance can shine even through the smallest acts of originality and defiance. In each human being, there is a seed of potential, and it is our choice whether or not to let it grow.

To fully understand brilliance, both genius and originality must be understood. Genius is mental fortitude – not just information or knowledge, but the ability to apply it in unique ways. For example, the valedictorian of a class may possess knowledge, but if they cannot use it, they are not brilliant. Application and innovation are the key. Original can be defined in two ways – as the source of something, or as something new and exceptional. Both can be used as a designation of brilliance, but the latter is far more important. Exceptionality and a defiant difference from expectations are both difficult to achieve, and it is no wonder that our society has been built to homogeny. It is far easier to succumb than it is to fight in every way, whether it is in believing differently than what is forced upon oneself, or in behaving or acting differently. It is geniuses who see diverse possibilities that are radically different from the norm that shape the future and build society up through their positive actions.

The scientific community is known for producing many brilliant innovators and powerful minds that change the world and its views. One of those geniuses was Niels Bohr. Bohr theorized quantum mechanics and changed the field of physics forever. Quantum mechanics states that there is an infinite set of probability for the motion of every electron, and that all motion in the atom is quantized in whole numbers. Albert Einstein famously told Bohr, "God doesn't play dice!" Bohr responded, "Stop telling God what to do." Though at the time, the theory was ignored, it was later proven to hold in a diverse array of circumstances, and is now regarded as our most comprehensive theory on atomic behavior. Charles Darwin's theory of evolution is another idea that was shunned at its time. Many believe that what was had always been and that all species had been created by a deity in their current state. However, Darwin observed that because the environment constantly changes, so must their residents through survival and selective breeding. His theory makes up modern biology, but caused quite the stir at the time. Another genius was Marie Curie. Curie discovered radioactive decay and won two Nobel prizes: one in chemistry and one in physics. Because of her gender, however, Madame Curie faced a long fight for recognition, defying what was expected of women in her era. While all of these people were extremely intelligent and creative, what distinguished them from others was persistence in the face of adversity and a willingness to stand up for their own ideas.

The art world have off more brilliance than the sun for a number of years through names like da Vinci and Beethoven. The real revolutionaries, however, made a far greater impact on their world. Vincent van Gogh, with his signature technique, bright color, and distinctive brush strokes is one of the best-known artists of all time now, but during his lifetime, his art was undesirable and not well liked. However, he continued to paint, creating masterpieces like Starry Night with his eye for color and unique gift. Mozart was loved during his life performing for

nobility and writing some of the best-known classical pieces of music. However, much of his music was criticized for being notoriously loud and quick-paced, and he died very young. His legacy of practicing unique music lives on, and today he is the most famous classical composer of all time. Oscar Wilde was another artist who was original and talented, writing poetry, plays, and novels that are now classics and were well known at the time. However, Wilde consistently faced scandal and was often rejected by his publishers. He did not stop writing, however, and often injected critiques of his society into his writing. These people all had the courage of eccentricity – they created what they believed in, whether or not the world was against them.

Politics, for all its convoluted mayhem, can be another hub of brilliance. Martin Luther King Jr., Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and Malala Yousafzai have all been important voices in their respective political climates, seeking change and activity working for it. During the American Civil Rights movement, many people stood up, but most noteworthy was that of Martin Luther King Jr. King was a reverend in the Deep South and continually stood out against racial injustices, encouraging others to join him in his fight for true freedom. He faced adversity from both federal and state governments, police, citizens that objected violently to his beliefs, and the law in general. He did not sit by, and he did not say silent. King was eventually shot and killed. Franklin Roosevelt was handed a difficult set of cards when he was elected president in 1932. The Great Depression has put millions of Americans out of work and done seemingly irreparable economic damage. However, by instating a series of civil services like Social Security and CCC, Roosevelt helped and the Great Depression and bring America into World War II. In his personal life, Roosevelt fought polio, making many physical activities difficult and rebelling against the stigma surrounding handicapped people. He is considered today to be one of America's greatest presidents. In our time, girls receiving an education should not be a radical

idea. In Malala Yousafzai's world, however, it was. Yousafzai was an avid blogger for the rights of Pakistani girls when she was shot by the Taliban in 2014. However, she survived, and rather than allow herself to be silenced, Yousafzai became an even stronger voice for young women.

This ability to persevere exists in every person – to stand up for our own individual paths and ideas, to defy what is expected of us, to show our bravery in our words as well as our actions. A less travelled road is not a better one – perhaps an entirely new way must be forged in order to achieve goals. Defiance should not be done on the basis of defiance. There must be thought, reason, and passion behind it in order to be truly original. However, rebellion and brilliance do not require large actions. Even small acts of a person – mismatched socks, social media posts, unpopular opinions – possess in them a spark of human brilliance. We are all our own person – why would we ever follow the masses?

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“The Animal Kingdom”

Sweating in the head, bumping against each other, and grazing on snacks masses of people file through the entrance to the zoo like cattle being herded into pens. Instinctively, a baby cries for his mother, hungry people huddle around a corndog stand, and families gather in the shade of an oak tree to escape the sun. The humans meander through the exhibits, ogling at gorillas and giraffes, shrinking back from giant snakes, pressing their faces to the glass of the aquarium, all the while certain of their superiority in the animal kingdom. They don't stop to consider the animals they gush over are intelligent, living creatures that follow their own life cycles and thought processes. To the humans, the animals exist merely for their entertainment, to do cute things so they can take pictures and videos. To them, the animals are in one category, and humans are in another. Many humans believe that we are separate from animals because of our ability to reason and the uniqueness of our thought processes, and while, as a species, humans are much more cognitively developed than most of the other animal species on our planet, we are still just animals.

As seen in the humans at the zoo crying for their mothers, gathering around food sources, and taking refuge from the sun in the shade, humans share many basic instincts with other animals. This close relationship between humans and other animals is apparent in H. G. Wells's novel, *The Island of Doctor Moreau*. In the book, Doctor Moreau believes he can turn animals like hyenas, pigs, and pumas into humans through surgical procedures. He isolates himself on an island with the animals and tirelessly experiments, manipulating the animals' thought processes to mimic those of humans. Through many trials and many errors, he comes close to success: he creates a breed of half-human, half-animal creatures capable of walking on two legs and

speaking. The ease of the transition from animal to human demonstrates how the two are already closely related. This concept is further supported in a scene in the novel in which a puma escapes from Doctor Moreau's compound. Moreau chases after the puma and a cat-and-mouse game ensues, with the puma, normally a predator animal, ironically becoming the prey. Moreau's animal instinct shows as he becomes the predator. At the end of the novel the protagonist, Edward Prendick, who had been trapped in Doctor Moreau's island throughout most of the novel, escapes back to the mainland, but his experiences with the human-like creatures alter the way he sees people forever. He sees the penetrating eyes of the puma, the slump of the ape-man, and the same behaviors he saw in the animal-people on the island as he observes the behaviors of other people.

Perhaps the most popular argument supporting the notion that humans are separate from animals is humans' capability of high-level thinking and our individual thought processes. Many believe that our thought processes are completely unique and incapable of emulation, but recent developments in artificial intelligence have shown that machines can imitate human thought very closely. Scientists and engineers have developed artificially intelligent computers that work through a series of impulses through a vast network that works like the neuron networks in human brains, allowing them to carry out the same reasoning processes as humans. For example, this year, Google's artificial intelligence program, AlphaGo, proves it was capable of extremely high levels of reasoning when it won a series of matches in the Japanese board game Go against Lee Seedol, a master of the game. Due to the strategic, intuitive nature of the game, it was previously believed that a computer could never beat a human master. Additionally, many believe that humans differentiate themselves from animals because humans "think for themselves," but when one examines human behavior it becomes apparent that we are driven by

instincts and repetitive cycles. In the average day of a person, he eats because he's hungry, he works because he needs money to obtain food and other necessities, he might flirt with a girl because of his natural instinct to find a mate, and he sleeps because he's tired. Human behavior becomes predictable when examined from an objective, scientific point of view. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle demonstrates this notion in his beloved Sherlock Holmes stories. In the detective tales, Sherlock Holmes, the brilliant, nearly sociopathic detective with the capability of separating emotion from logic, solves mysteries with nearly superhuman effortlessness. Because of his ability to observe human behavior from an objective standpoint, he is able to discern patterns and motives others are incapable of seeing. He observes humans like Temple Grandin observes cattle, and the pattern and cycles of human behavior, just like the patterns and cycles of cattle, become apparent.

It has been said that if an intelligent alien race were to come to Earth, they wouldn't see humans as the dominant species of the planet. Instead, they would pick out insects as the most advanced group, as they are more abundant and have developed systems of living just as intricate as those of humans. Throughout the entire universe, with its billions and billions of galaxies, stars, and planets, there are bound to be other intelligent life forms. In the grand scheme of things, it is likely that humans are just another species on another planet. This possibility is expressed in the *Twilight Zone* episode "To Serve Man." In this episode, an intelligent alien race comes down to Earth, ostensibly to help humans develop as a species. The aliens teach people revolutionary new agricultural methods to solve world hunger and are by all accounts generous and polite. While the humans are skeptical of the aliens' intentions at first, the aliens show them their book, titled "To Serve Man," which convinces the humans that the aliens are truly there to help. After gaining the trust of them humans, the aliens begin taking people back to their planet,

with the stated purpose of showing them their way of living to help humans develop their own societies. Only when the humans reach the planet do they realize that the book, "To Serve Man" is actually a cookbook, and the humans have become the aliens' main course. In the *Twilight Zone* episode, the aliens viewed humans as humans as humans view animals; an inferior, stupid species only good for a food source. To the aliens humans are just another animal species.

If those same aliens observed the people at the zoo, they might not realize that the humans are there to observe the animals. The fences and glass walls of the animal exhibits might separate the two groups, but mentally, they are more similar than many humans think. Despite humans' advanced thinking abilities, we are still just a part of the animal kingdom.

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“I Am What I Say I Am”

Mankind has before been called “the most dangerous game.” This, I propose, is because we are not “game” at all. Of course this sounds ridiculously apparent – of course we separate ourselves from the beat of the field. They are beasts and we are not. In the fields of science, and even history, we seem much the same. Biologically our compositions are vastly similar: same cell structure, same diet more or less same basic needs to a point. But when considering mind, the differences begin to appear.

Looking at Maslow’s Hierarchy of Human Needs is one way to see the distinction between what is human and what is animal. It begins with basic needs – shelter, food, water. These are things that are needed by all inhabitants of earth; bears need caves, squirrels need nuts. However, the upper levels begin to diverge from this mold. They begin to explain the need for self-assurance and esteem. This is one view of where man becomes himself and branches away from the flora and fauna.

Mark Twain, famed author of literature such as “The Adventures of Tom Sawyer,” and “The Prince and The Pauper,” took a defined stance on what sets mankind apart from the rest of earth’s inhabitants. He says that man is different because it is evil – or rather because of its ability to be evil. This is not to say that animals cannot be perceived as evil; this is clearly displayed to us as children when in cartoons or movies the antagonist is portrayed as a predatory animal, such as the Big Bad Wolf who wants nothing but to devour the poor, defenseless piggies. We have a tendency to often view certain inhuman creatures as “bad” but Twain proposes that on a basic level, they are not. His philosophy supports the idea that regardless of action, nothing lacking a moral compass has the capacity to do wrong. It is similar to the idea that when an

infant squeezes a cat's tail like there's no tomorrow he is not doing anything malicious or wrong but just "doesn't know any better. The Christian bible supports this idea, as well. In the book of James, chapter four, verse seventeen "sin" is described by one universal standard. It states that if any man knows the good he ought to do and does not do it, then that is sin for him. This brings sin (or evil) down to a personal level making it unique to each individual. The only circumstance that constitutes an action as evil is the knowledge that it is by the individual who partakes in it. In this, Twain is supported in saying that, as the only begins with knowledge of right and wrong, humans are set apart by our capacity to be evil.

However, it is important to note that by this philosophy mankind is not inherently evil; it is something we choose. Hobbes presents a different viewpoint. His philosophy presents the idea that the natural state of all things, both human and non, is disorder and chaos. He claims that war is the natural order of the world. This idea is not far-fetched; a look through history supports the view. Of course, World Wars seem far and uncommon war itself is to this world as cherry pie is to America. Speaking of America, she herself has been involved in struggles such as the Revolutionary war, the Civil War, the Vietnam War, and the Cold War (not to mention both World Wars) – and these are only the tip of the iceberg! As we speak, there are uprisings taking place in the Middle East, among other regions, and covert operations happening all over the world. Foucault seems to support this stance in his claims that resistance is a part of nature – every bit as belonging and inevitable as rains, hurricanes, and earthquakes. According to Foucauldian philosophy, when any given force rises up, another will rise to challenge it. Then, as one knife sharpens another, the two forces will propel their enemy thereby propelling themselves and creating an endless cycle of clash. These points support human nature as wicked and unruly – but as Foucault predicted, there are forces that contend with these propositions.

Philosophical mind Augustine saw the good not only in humans, but in life itself. Augustine claimed that everything must be good, or it would not exist. By this, he justified the belief that everything we presume to be bad contains some element of good. In layman's terms, every dark cloud has a silver lining. Say a town floods; well, it provided the plants with water. Say the star basketball player at a high school breaks his legs; at least now the other students get a chance to shine. Essentially, Augustine took an optimistic approach to life and human condition. Levinas' ideas coincide with this, as he suggests that we have a natural predisposition toward helping one another. Levinas describes and explains the connection felt between persons; we are drawn to helping those in need because we inherently see ourselves in others. Humans are good and charitable creatures because we relate to one another. There is no way around seeing this relation, regardless of who it pertains to – it simply happens when we interact. He even goes as far to say that relations built between people, even two total strangers, are the building block to realizing potential and understanding success rather than one's relationship to himself or any relationship to a god or higher power. Both of these philosophers view mankind as fundamentally good and oppose ideas like those of Foucault and Hobbes.

Aristotle proposes an entirely different view: that although we see everything to be caught between two worlds, that of Good and that of Bad, it is not so. Rather, what we see as "good," is the mean between two evils. The Mean Theory states that a balance between catastrophic sides is what is desired. For example, self-confidence is desired. However too much leads to arrogance which is hazardous. On the other end of the spectrum, too little leads to low self-esteem which is equally as catastrophic. Aristotle taught that finding the Mean is the only way for us to really prosper and avoid chaos.

These philosophies offer differing viewpoints, yet each man holds his own viewpoint to be absolutely true. It is human to assume that only one of these dispositions is the correct one, and the others are incorrect, but, were you to question these various men as to what is right, you would never come to one final answer no matter how many years of debate ensued. Each man believes his own stance to be the right one, and so, for him, it is. Whichever philosophy, or combination of philosophies, you believe to be true will also be true for you. There is only one truth – but it is dependent upon the individual; it is *his* truth, and it is absolute. Just as James 4:17 personalized sin, this takes truth and belief to an individual level. Whatever is true, then, whatever is good or bad, you make so by believing that it is.

So it has been said, “to be human is to be flawed.” What does this mean? When supposing that humans are characteristically good or bad, it is always a game of comparisons based on a scale with no end. Then, it must be realized that upon saying “good,” or “bad,” we truly mean “better,” or “worse.” When pondering what composes the upward end of the ruler we use to measure ourselves, it must be established what constitutes perfection; what constitutes “flawlessness.” This question seems redundant when it is taken into perspective that the concept of immaculacy, whether portrayed in traits, disposition, or circumstance, is determined itself by human mindset and assumption. So should we not simply deem ourselves as perfect seeing as we decide what perfection is? Then, when contemplating what lies toward the bottommost end of the ruler, we must ask the same questions of what constitutes evil. Once again, this is decided on by our own mindset, so it seems inevitable that we would simply place traits we don’t possess toward the lower end of the scale as to make ourselves look good. Yet we don’t do this as made evident by the fact that each and every one of us sees evil in himself. We are what we see ourselves to be – we are as good or as bad as we believe we are, yet we don’t choose to consider

ourselves perfect. This is justified in identifying and realizing the most human of all traits we possess: curiosity. Through all forms of advancement and evolution, mankind has been linked by a single habit of ours being the desire to learn and the belief that we can. We hold out for hope that we can progress toward something greater, something *better*. Without believing that there is some form of a “light” at the end of our tunnel, the purpose of life itself would cease to exist. We, as mankind, bring to fruition the purpose of life in trusting that there is always a greener grass, a brighter horizon, or an upper plateau. By believing that we are not yet perfect but someday can be.

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4A Champion

“Groupthink, Synergy, and Other Buzzwords: A Culture of Conformity”

While the quintessential American and humanist ideal has been predicated upon the free-range individual who puts the free-range chicken to shame, the notion that one can and should roam the quirky terrain of nuances and complexities that comprise the human mind is slowly eroding. Even though policymakers, social commentators, and contemporary quasi-artists spout off an amalgamation of buzzwords and policy prescriptions that will incite a spirit of “creativity” that will somehow span all generations while simultaneously focusing exclusively on school-aged youth, our modern education system not only demonstrates to its students the comforts of conformity but encourages the youth of America to revel in the warm, swaddling blanket of vanilla thought.

The sardonic irony inherent in this coddling of minds from cradle to grave is that the canon of Western literature is littered with dystopian novels warning against the murky, mushy process of groupthink in which our society is currently engaged. From Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* to Kurt Vonnegut’s eccentric and depressing *Breakfast of Champions*, authors have identified harbingers of a destitute intellectual landscape for well over a generation, but college students, custodians of wisdom and knowledge, are singlehandedly rejecting the crevices and cliffs of difficult thought under the guise of “safe spaces” and tolerance, a word whose original meaning has been distorted into a state of disrepair. However, this cyanide pill of social and intellectual decline would be easier to swallow if George Orwell’s *1984* were not written and so ubiquitously disseminated. In his novel, Orwell creates the protagonist Winston, a hopeless intellectual and romantic eager to buck the blatant trends of groupthink and populism that enamored his fellow citizens. Ultimately, Winston is oppressed and suppressed by a government

insider named O'Brien who displays to Winston that conformity is easier, cleaner, and more aesthetically pleasing than dissent. While I do not believe in the power of mystics and clairvoyants and disregard television commercials advertising psychic hotlines eager to take the calls of the emotionally afflicted, I cannot help but wonder if Winston is the human mind upon the age of cognitive awareness and if O'Brien is the modern education system, predicated upon big data and the whims of Pearson ETS executives. However, salvation is nigh, my dear child, for tech startups are delving into the lucrative education (which admittedly sounds like an oxymoron) business, seeking to restore the true spirit of creativity and growth, cultivating the fertile garden of the human mind.

In a recent issue of the *New Yorker* magazine, a profile was conducted about AltSchool, a tech startup-elementary school hybrid that embraced the current educational trend toward big data while also proactively preserving the quirks of the human mind, especially those of schoolchildren. The key differentiator between AltSchool and the average elementary school is that AltSchool integrates a curriculum so flexible that Tonya Harding would probably assault it, with students essentially creating their assignments as they follow the rabbit trail of their own intellectual pursuits. A seventh-grade student who was interviewed for the piece displayed his newfound creation, a padded toilet seat to appease his thing frame that is also highly sanitary. All additional projects and papers are documented using a software system that is easily accessible to parents, teachers, and administrators, with all relevant persons able to analyze and digest the data without an advanced degree in statistics. This technology has the potential to revolutionize the educational system, with students cultivating the spirit of entrepreneurship and creativity in addition to understanding the fundamentals of the liberal arts and engineering. In twenty years,

genius may not be the ability of a seventh-grader to read and enjoy *Treasure Island*, but the creation of everyday essentials to make life better.

However, if our educational system continues to passively oppress its students with the standardized collection of data that is rarely ever employed for the student's benefit, then our schools will continue to breed adults that have little to no interest in the education of the whole self, and will therefore never experience the thrill of the inception of a creative thought. In a piece that appeared in the *Washington Post*, a retiring educator named Gerald Conti explained why he was leaving a profession that he enjoyed so much. He stated that his profession "left him," and that signs posted in front of his English classroom since the first day he started teaching that stated "Words matter, ideas matter" no longer felt true. Words and ideas are the building blocks of creativity, for those who can coherently condense and verbalize their multitude of half-formed ideas and almost-complete thoughts are those who ultimately implement their plans with the greatest rate and quality of success. While statistics and data can be a boon to understanding certain aspects of a student's educational shortcomings, little creativity or genius will result from bubbling seventy multiple-choice questions in four hours.

The tradition of the humanities and creativity has been built upon discomfort and dissent. While bigots often use the excuse of "political incorrectness" to say whatever overtly offensive vitriol comes to mind, a culture of groupthink and mass "tolerance" has replaced a culture of respectful inquiry. If asking a foreign exchange student their country of origin constitutes a microaggression, then words no longer matter. If exploring in-depth the wretched nature of slavery and its historical and contemporary impact on African-Americans is hateful then ideas no longer matter. If reading Frederick Douglass is wrong, then I don't want to be right.

A philosopher once said that society honors its living conformists and its dead troublemakers. While this inclination may be a basic facet of human nature and therefore irreversible, a spirit of creativity and genius will never result from a blasé spirit of conformity. Words and ideas matter, for they are the medium through which the river of creativity and genius flow.

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“Humanity’s Choice”

In crafting the first primitive man from clay, in breathing the sacred air of life into this man’s newly formed lungs, Prometheus created humanity. Forever a trickster, he secured the best meat from the worshipful sacrifices they were required to give to the gods, and he stole the fire from Olympus so that his men would be warm and fed down on earth. And forever seeing himself in his creations, Prometheus also allowed men a brain so that they, too, would have the same capacity of trickery and choice: essentially, Prometheus gave every man the ultimate power to decide the course of his life. Such a blessing to outwit the gods and ascend even further than where man already stands, however, is also a curse. While choice sets man apart in the forest of life from the beasts that surround him, it also gives him immeasurable power – power not only to ruin his life, but the power to possibly ruin other lives, as well. In what has become a paradoxical effect of the original capacity for choice that Prometheus originally granted upon his clay men, instead of using such choices to always benefit and better themselves, humanity sometimes strays from Prometheus’ plan for their existence and instead descends to the beasts that they have been raised up from. After all, when humanity is given a choice, there will always be those who utilize it for the best and those who don’t.

The way humanity utilizes the choices it is given coincide with the rises and falls of various empires and nations, inevitably leading to a flux within every man himself. In one era, for example, education holds value; freedoms are expanded; life is improved. Yet, as if a coin was flipped, the next era values brutality – the baser, more bestial qualities that man sometimes tried to hide. Such a change from one side of the coin to the next occurs mainly from the wars that put new leaders in power. In the war itself individuality is lost; people are sent to fight for

someone else's beliefs; they are no longer given a choice what to believe in. Tim O'Brien, in his semi-autobiographical novel *The Things They Carried*, portrays how his own choices are taken from him because of his being drafted to fight in the Vietnam War. O'Brien, a small-town new college graduate, is an ardent pacifist, and he views the war as something no one really understands – as a battle that everyone is fighting solely because they are told to. As he states in his book, “men fought and men died because they were embarrassed not to.” There is no choice in the matter. O'Brien himself could not even disobey the law and burn his draft card. As soon as he joins the army, O'Brien loses his choice: he essentially loses himself. He becomes a being, a beast sent into battle to fight for a moment of freedom in a country that was likely to turn to communism even after American lives were lost fighting for democracy. When O'Brien loses his choice in what he stands and fights for, he also loses what has made him a man. No more than a beast, a pawn in the game of global politics, O'Brien fights, and then he returns home, and like so many other men who have fought and who have seen and who have done unimaginable things in times voice of choice and reason, O'Brien never forgets the things he has done, the things that have, if only for a moment, lowered him from man and into something less.

It is this something less that affects so many people. Despite a human's capacity for thought and choice, despite his capacity for memory of what he has done and what he is still doing, *still* there are those who choose the pathways that lead them to something less than what they should be. This trend has occurred throughout history, and while O'Brien has no choice in what has made him subhuman, there are millions of Americans in contemporary society that do have such a choice, yet they, too, still do not properly utilize it. According to a Princeton study by two Pulitzer Prize winning economists and as reported by *The Washington Post*, a new choice has taken hold in America. It is no war with another nation, no battle for oil or against terrorism,

yet it, too, is a choice that, according to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), over two million Americans have made – a choice that has not only taken away their capacity of mind but also their capacity to have a future. This choice, this wide epidemic that virtually no one realized until over 14,000 people died from it in 2014, is opioid and alcohol addiction. Its victims? A largely white, largely uneducated, middle aged population. In the act of one moment in the span of one choice, thousands upon thousands of men and women are lowering themselves from individuals capable of contributing to society to people who are the dregs at the bottom of the bottle. For that one high, that short escape from a life that seems increasingly unbearable to survive in, men and women are ruining their livers while simultaneously ruining their lives. By abusing the very thing that makes them human – the capacity for choice – these people are also descending to something below themselves, to something that is more bestial than their previous state before the choice. Unlike O'Brien and the countless other men who had no choice in their descending to beasts, two million Americans willingly make such a choice: they willingly choose to inebriate their minds and greatly diminish their chance for a better future. They take the one thing that makes them human, the one thing that could save them from their economic status, and pour it – like they should be pouring their pills and alcohol – down the drain.

Even though some Americans abuse their choices and even though O'Brien lost his, hope still remains for many others. Despite any situation, despite any circumstance, if one has the will and the drive and the determination, choices still can be made to better one's future. Even for the slave's of America's past, those already viewed as chattel those whose value was the equivalent of some livestock, hope still remains in that ever fateful human choice. As detailed in her autobiography *Narrative of the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs, even as a slave with no rights at all to her safety or freedom, still has the choice to choose a better future for herself. Even as a

woman with absolutely no power, it was her choice that empowered her all the same. Forced to work under a master named Dr. Flint who made it very clear just exactly what he wished to do with young Jacobs (who was originally thirteen at the time), she knew the only way to fully protect herself was to escape him. Even as her free grandmother and a white neighbor tried to purchase her freedom, Dr. Flint would not let Jacobs go: to be truly free, Jacobs would have to make the choice to run away from the only place she had ever known. Despite her situation's lack of available choices, despite her status as a black woman enslaved to a vindictive master who wasted hundreds of dollars searching for her in the North, Jacobs still had the courage and the determination to attain her freedom at whatever cost it took. From leaving her children and her family behind to having to live in the insanely small, uninsulated attic of her grandmother's house for seven grueling years as she waited for her master to give up searching for her (though he never did until he died), Jacobs persisted, and she eventually survived it. She made the choice to do so. Being human gave her the power to do so, and in doing so, Jacobs proved exactly why she and the rest of her brothers and sisters in chains should not be sold alongside the horses at the auction. Choice is what made her human, and choice is what set her free.

After all, as Prometheus himself proves, choice has the power of going two ways: it can create a new race, superior to the beasts that surround them on earth, but it can also have consequences, sentencing one god who had only meant to do good to a cliff to have his liver eaten daily by an eagle for eternity. Just as Prometheus had the power of choice, so, too, do humans. It is what sets humanity apart, what makes humans human. Yet, choice is fickle. In the same great gulp of choice that saved Jacobs from slavery, another great gulp ended fourteen thousands American lives. In the same choice that put one man in power, another choice can take choices from people like Tim O'Brien away. In the end, it seems, it's up to the person, to his

choice and how he wishes to affect himself and those around him. Humans, after all, have the capability to choose the path that they travel – to choose if that path leads them to better or to worse things – but in the end, they do not get a choice in the consequences they must accept.

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“The Call of Conformity”

A man sits at a large control panel. In front of him is a window that looks into the adjacent room. Trembling, his hand hovers over a dial on the panel marked “voltage.” At present, it is set at “high.” “Are you sure I should continue?” asks the man, who is sweating profusely. “He said he had heart issues.” Another man in a white lab coat glances coldly at the controls winces. After a moment of hesitation, he cranks the dial up to “dangerously high.” In the next room, the man strapped to a chair gives a blood-curdling scream.

That was Stanley Milgram’s infamous obedience and social conformity experiment, conducted to explore the extent to which humans are willing to follow orders from authority. Fresh out of World War II, the burning question of the times was why so many sensible, everyday-folk had rallied behind the Nazis, aiding their ethnic cleansing without question. Chillingly, of the hundreds of “teacher-student” pairs Milgram tested, only a handful of “teachers” refused to administer the final, presumably lethal dose of electricity to the actor on the other side of the screen. John Stuart Mill once called our fear of being eccentricity the “chief danger of our time.” More than a century later, that fear and the sinister shadows of conformity still prey on society.

Milgram’s obedience experiment is not the only one that has exposed the chilling aspects of the human mind, specifically its tendency to conform. Another startling – as well as ethically questionable – experiment endeavored to simulate a prison environment at Stanford University. Participants were randomly assigned to be “inmates” or “guards” in the makeshift prison in the basement. The guards, quickly realizing their power over the prisoners, began to abuse it. During

the two-week period, prisoners were variably forced to strip, or were beaten, or were even made to relieve themselves in public. So atrocious did the guards' power displays become that the experiment was aborted. It is a natural impulse of human nature to want to belong, to avoid being ostracized. In the Stanford prison experiment, group-think, or the desire for social conformity, revealed itself at its ugliest. Perhaps that is why modern society is so intent on following the latest trends, which change at the drop of a hat. Moreover, the Stanford prison experiment reveals the extent to which people are starved for power. To seize and abuse it so readily only highlights how much the power of the individual has drowned in the sea of the masses.

Though the Milgram experiments were conducted in the States, conformity pervades the global scene, especially in Asia. In China, the deeply entrenched ideals of the meritocracy pressure students to conform to unrealistic academic ideals. Rather than undergoing a process that evaluates their achievements holistically, Chinese students have their futures decided by a single test – the gaokao, the national college entrance exam. A poor score on the gaokao can wipe out the efforts of a student's entire high school career, and, in some cases, prohibit the student from even attending college. Naturally, if a student's future hinges on a single exam, and if all students in China have their school grades posted in public, the pressure to achieve that academic prowess is crushing. Teen suicide is chillingly common. Even for those who seem to be succeeding, there is a need to hide the fear of failure under a mask of ease, or all is well. In America, it is common to stereotype Asians as hardworking, and naturally adept at math and science. The idealized image of Asian academic prowess only fuels the need for Asian-Americans to meet their expectations. To set himself apart from the masses, an Asian male must be eccentric, or else risk being lost in the sea of college applicants who have perfect grades and test scores just like him. Paradoxically, they must both conform and stand out. Though

conformity comes in all flavors, the common goal is to avoid becoming an outsider and, most especially, a failure of society.

Even before John Stuart Mill warned against the dangers of a society ruled by public opinion, our founding fathers were concerned with tyranny of the masses. James Madison warned against hyperpluralism and the threat of factions in *The Federalist Papers*, foreseeing a country ruled by competing interest groups that drown out the voice of the individual. More than 200 years later, America is victim to precisely that kind of policy gridlock. Party polarization has ballooned to the point of irreconcilability; the Republicans and the Democrats have lost all common territory and willingness to compromise. Policy is ruled by iron triangles and the lobbying of interest groups. The current presidential primary race brings the power of the bandwagon effect into light. Donald Trump's meteoric rise to success perfectly illustrates the power of eccentricity in shaping public opinion. Rather than agreeing with his policies, supporters are drawn to his flamboyancy and fiery rhetoric. In a society where standing out from the crowd is often a mark against one's credibility, it is likely that Trump represents the "originality" that Mill extols. The future of the world depends on who the masses choose to follow, then who the masses choose to follow ultimately depends on the masses' desire to conform with each other. Group-think will always be a fundamental part of how society functions; one must simply have the courage to be that rare person who refuses to be cruel despite the will of the majority, the one who refuses to harm another human being despite stern orders from a well-respected man in a white lab coat. E. B. White once wrote that there are no differing levels of uniqueness, only a single state of being unique. It is up to all of us to treasure our uniqueness, despite the tantalizing siren songs of our common desire to fit in. We must resist the call of conformity.

