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Graduation is Like Death

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Abstract

Graduation is supposed to be a time to be happy and celebrate. So why does it often feel so terrifying, so empty? The work of existentialist philosophers Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre can shed some light on why graduation is a rupture that is so disruptive.

Summer is the season of graduations. Roughly 4 million university students will graduate in the US this summer, and another half a million will graduate in the UK. Many of them will put on silly flat hats and dark gowns, listen to officials mumble in Latin or try to be inspiring in English.

But beware of ceremony. Robes or ruffles are often used to hide an existential reality.

Graduation is supposed to be a happy time – a time to 'look back on your accomplishments' and 'celebrate your future', as greeting cards constantly remind us. It is the culmination of what you have been working towards for most of your life. Your parents may look back with envy. Your uncle may tell you that this is the happiest time of your life.

So why don't you feel that way? Why does this time of life often feel so alienating, so disappointing? So terrifying? So empty.

Why should this culmination of the young part of your life feel, well, a little like death?

The existentialist philosophers can help us put into words what's going on behind the curtain of clichés and customs (which we may have dimly sensed, but were afraid to notice). Martin Heidegger wrote about the structure of human life – he called the characteristically human way of living 'Dasein': being-there. For Heidegger, there are two central features of human life: being-in-the-world and being-with-others. The idea of being-in-the-world is being *involved* in projects we care about. Part of what makes us human is that we are always *up to* something – engaging in our worldly activities that we pursue keenly through time. Like a movie projector, we project into the world *what to do*. Our concerns throw light on what's *important*, what's *significant*, what is *to be done* next (and after that). In fact, it is only in light of our individual and collective concerns that the world shows up as having *significance* at all.

Even when we don't explicitly *plan*, we press forward into activities and take them seriously. What our projects are, of course, varies greatly. Some of us are absorbed in growing tomatoes, others in fixing up racing boats or old houses, designing hats or websites, repairing roads, practising for a regatta or studying for a degree. Each undertaking gains meaning in terms of the next project it leads into: you rip out the old flooring on the way to laying down new tile on the way to remodelling the kitchen, as part of the project of fixing up the house; you write the paper, to get the credit for the English course, on your way to getting the degree… Living into those projects gives our lives whatever semblance of meaning

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they can have. And that semblance of meaning, for Heidegger, is given by what he called 'das Man' – by shared understandings of *what one does*, what the *significance is* of having a nicely tiled kitchen floor (rather than dirt or linoleum), or of having a degree.

What Heidegger saw was that despite the massive and endless differences in *what* we concern ourselves with, we are all essentially creatures who *have* concerns that we take to be meaningful and important. And we structure our lives by projecting into the future. We are creatures who are always *ahead of ourselves*, always climbing over one task for the next, guided by a sense of what we are up to, and who we can become. We live as if we are eternal, capable of forever building, project upon project.

The trouble is, we die. We all know that we all die, though we try to hide this from ourselves. We joke about death ('there are two things certain in life: you're going to die, and you're going to pay taxes'). We focus on the deaths of *other people*, and treat them as 'mishaps' that came about because poor Sam always did drive too fast, and Julia took up smoking at an early age – as if death is avoidable for *me*, with sufficient care. As Heidegger puts it, 'the dying of Others is seen often enough as a social inconvenience, if not even a downright tactlessness, against which the public is to be guarded' (298). (My mother once complained to me in a tired tone: 'I have four funerals I have to go to this week!')

But if I face up to the reality of *my own* death, I can see that it is a wall, and my projects and plans cannot outstrip it. Death interrupts the structure of my projecting – the very structure that gives my activities significance. And in doing so, it threatens to topple all my prior

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activities backwards like dominoes, and rob them of their significance. For our tasks can no longer be stepping stones on the way to something further. As Pablo in Jean-Paul Sartre's story 'The Wall' puts it, 'I wouldn't have moved so much as my little finger if I had only imagined I would die like this' (11). Death threatens to leave us disengaged, and as a result, as Sartre puts it, it disenchants everything. Facing up to our death can leave us in what Heidegger called a form of 'anxiety' (but might be closer to what we would these days clinically label as depression) – an anxiety at the thought that none of these activities were intrinsically meaningful to begin with, that nothing is or *ever was* worth doing. Death threatens to unravel the whole structure of significance that makes our world show up to us as meaningful at all.

'We are creatures who are always *ahead of ourselves*, always climbing over one task for the next, guided by a sense of what we are up to, and who we can become. We live as if we are eternal, capable of forever building, project upon project.'

Death isn't the only situation that threatens to interrupt the usual structures of activity (those structures that make our lives alive with meaning). Those of us living today have seen it before: in 2020, with the disruptions of the pandemic. At first came the disappointment – of cancelled regattas, theatrical performances, renovations, concerts and examinations we had long worked towards. But after that came a certain emptiness. Many came to the stage of: 'I don't even *care* about rowing anymore'; 'I can't see any more why I *ever* cared so much about being in that dumb play'. That is the anxiety: the threat of seeing that none of it was *ever* capable of giving my life a deep meaning or significance.

An impending graduation can bring on something similar. Graduation rips a huge fissure in life – an artificial one, induced by our current ways of structuring education and careers. Most of the projects that have structured our days and directed our activities – studying for the physics exams, practising for the regatta, rehearsing for the final concert – abruptly cease. In many cases, never to be repeated. And never to be built on towards some further, connected goals. And so, all the meaning we had invested them with becomes untethered and threatens to drift away into insignificance. In fact, the whole *world* we engaged in at school or university threatens to lose significance as we inevitably disengage from the tasks and activities that gave it meaning. (You may have glimpsed the disenchantment on the faces of returning alumni, who can no longer take it all seriously.)

The fissure also interrupts what Heidegger called 'being-with'. On Heidegger's analysis, another central element of what it is to be human, apart from being engaged in our worldly projects, is to be involved with one another, to be-with one another in a way that shows concern for the projects of others. This is what Heidegger called 'solicitude'. But this, too, is interrupted by the fissure presented by graduation: our graduating friends, too, have *their* projects interrupted, making it difficult to support and take interest in projects of theirs. Those who remain behind are engaged in those very races and performances whose lustre has been dimmed by our dawning suspicion of their insignificance.

And so, graduation presents a situation in which two of the central features of human existence – our being-in-the-world and being-with-others – fall into the fissure, where the light of our lived concern and engaged activities can no longer reach them.

Of course, unlike death, it is not a complete end to our projects and being-with. But it *is* a

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major interruption that calls for a radical revaluing of those projects we have engaged with, and of those to come.

Aha, but what about planning for the next phase to come? Doesn't that bring in new forms of activity and planning, along with a liberating sense of an open future: the freedom your uncle envies, and your mom tells you to treasure while you can?

In the phase of fissure, it can be hard to latch onto new projects to bridge the void of meaninglessness. For often there is little we can do before we enter the new situation, where we can start to gain the skills of navigating a new town, mastering a new job, getting through medical school or being-with new people.

Once we have fixed our choice and arrive in the new situation, we can begin to engage in the comforting activity of planning and projecting anew.

But before we come to that, we must face our freedom.

There is indeed a liberty here – a form of freedom Jean Paul Sartre wrote insightfully about. But as Sartre brings out well, this very freedom is not (as the popular press, political and advertising slogans, and older relatives assure us) purely *positive.* Instead, it is a source of deep existential anguish. For at this great fissure in our lives, we must decide (not once and for all, but at least for now), *who to be*. The greatest philosophical question of life is this simple one: *What shall I do?* And our freedom in answering it, if we confront it honestly, brings anguish in the face of our lack of guidance and total responsibility.

Of course, as Sartre knew well, most of the time, most of us hide this from ourselves. We hide in what Sartre called 'bad faith'. One mode of this, tempting for many at graduation, is to think it's *just obvious* what I *should do* or even *have to do* now. I have to go to med school – it's what I've been working towards my whole life. I have to take over the family business – my mom is counting on me to do that. I have to take this job – it's the only offer I have, or it pays the most, or is the only one in the city where my boyfriend (dad, sister…) lives. These '*have to's*' are what Sartre referred to as so many 'guardrails against anguish'. As Sartre writes, 'Values are sown on my path as thousands of little real demands, like the signs which order us to keep off the grass' (77).

But it is your own values, your own choices and your adopted sense of yourself that throws forward the seeds that spring up as demands to continue the path of studies you have started, to not disappoint your mother, to live near your boyfriend.

We are raised from the start to hide our freedom from ourselves, to erect guardrails and never question them. A huge portion of children's books focus on the idea that you must *find your calling, discover your true nature or talents.* The My Little Ponies must discover their 'cutie marks' that will reveal to them their true talents (and thereby their essence and destiny). It is enshrined in religion, in the idea that you must find *God's plan* for you. It is enshrined in pop culture, with the insistence that you should take time to 'find yourself' or find 'your calling'. Similar illusions overlie our ideas of being-with others – that you must find your 'soulmate', your 'other half', to complete you. Even Taylor Swift writes (alluding to an Asian folk myth about a thread of fate tying soulmates together) 'Isn't it just so pretty to think all along there was some invisible string, tying you to me?' (At least she distances herself from this myth, presenting it as merely 'pretty to think'! And indeed it is pretty, or at least comforting, to think it. For it masks our anguish with a pretty metaphor.)

These are comforting myths – for a while. They hide the anguish and responsibility of freedom. They present the task of life as one of *discovery* – not invention. And it is a discovery that, when we are young and constantly bombarded with these illusions and myths, we still hope to make.

But the trouble is not only that these myths hide our true situation from ourselves and deceive us into bad faith. It can also lead us astray. Assume that your 'true calling' is to be a doctor, and if you fail or are removed from your post you may find utter devastation, a feeling that you are worthless, that your life was wasted. You may not be able to do like Tomas in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, and find joy instead as a window washer. Or you may find

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your way into a career as a surgeon, and yet find yourself disillusioned. You may find that reaching that goal is not the pinnacle of fulfilment you expected. Assume that you have a 'soulmate' out there waiting to be found, and when you find a person who you can laugh with, cook pasta and run trails with, who can be with you in a contented life, sharing everydayness, you may fail to detect the 'special glow' of a soulmate you were expecting, and leave them behind to continue the fruitless search for something that was never there.

'As you work your way through time, you take those beautiful possibilities that defined how you thought of yourself when you were eight, or fourteen, or twenty and, one by one, shoot them in the head.'

Once we strip the myths away, we can see that the project for life is not one of *discovery* (discovering my true nature, soulmate, destiny, calling), but rather one of *invention.* We must invent someone to be. And then stick with it every day. Or not.

In some ways, yes, seeing life as an invention is liberating – liberating from the 'have to's' that we tend to let direct us. But it is also terrifying. For if I am the one who chooses what to value, who invents what to be, then I am the one who bears responsibility for it. Even if I ask others for advice, the final responsibility remains mine. (For whom do I choose to ask? How do I choose whether to heed the advice?)

The process of invention is not only terrifying; it is inevitably disappointing and constraining. We are, as Heidegger notices, creatures who *live in our possibilities.* We are constantly pressing forward into possible activities and projects, and we understand who we are not just in terms of where we have been and what we have done, but *what we can become.* Part of the freedom of youth (even when you are still living under the roof and direction of parents and teachers) lies in the fact that so many possibilities are open to you. When you are eight, you might love ballet and drawing anime, and doing maths and making videos, and for a while, you can keep all of those possibilities alive. You might one day think you will be a ballerina; another day think you will be an artist or astronaut. The process of growing up and inventing who to be is a process of de-liberating: for we must inevitably abandon some possibilities to pursue others vigorously enough to have a chance to realize them. Making one sculpture with the clay that is given to us means abandoning all the other creations that could have been. As you work your way through time, you take those beautiful possibilities that defined how you thought of yourself when you were eight, or fourteen, or twenty and, one by one, shoot them in the head. And that is a painful process – one that ends at death, when there are no more possibilities left. Cutting off our possibilities is an inevitable part of living as beings moving through time. But it can be like cutting off our own limbs. As we age, we mourn those lost possibilities, as we might mourn lost lovers.

It is the freedom that comes from seeing all the possibilities before you that your older relatives really envy. (It is also this link to endless unknown possibilities that gives babies part of their charm.) And glimpsing the inevitability of cutting most of them down, or leaving them to wither, can lead to despair. The older we get, the more we accumulate the residue of our life path and prior choices, much as we accumulate scars on our bodies. As Sartre put it, following Hegel, 'Essence is what has been' (72). The residue of our past choices and experiences is like an ever-growing stone we must drag behind us – not eliminating freedom but gradually changing

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the stakes and constraining the plausible options. (Once you turn fifty and have lived for years as a sedentary accountant, your dream of being a ballerina is not likely to be a live option.)

So, what is to be done? We can at least pause, and feel entitled to our feelings of anguish, disappointment and anxiety – even at what is relentlessly marketed as a 'happy time'. We can resist the fakey ways of covering over these feelings with empty sayings, robes and frosting. We can also better avoid the mistakes and disappointments that arise when we fall for the illusions of the *'have to's*' and the obligation to find a 'true calling', 'soul mate' or 'destiny'.

We can face up to the need to invent someone to be, to invent a life, and own it as ours. If all goes well, on the other side of the fissure we can press forward into a new situation in ways that will gradually enchant a new world with forms of significance we can't yet glimpse. And even as we press forward we can try, against all the odds, to remain open to the ever-present possibility of rechoosing, reshaping and reinventing as we go on pressing forward into the future that lies on the other side of the fissure.

To all those approaching the fissure: Happy Graduation.

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