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Philosophy of Death

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Death in Graduation

My memory doesn't extend past the beginning of my education. The entirety of my life up until this point has been defined by my identity as a student. Most of my friends were made at school, and a majority of my accomplishments academic, I might become depressive if I calculated the amount of time I have spent doing homework. So it is a big deal when college graduation arrives and school comes to an end. The experience allotted by the major changes of graduation offer graduates unique insight into life. Soon to be and recently anointed college graduates have a unique relationship to mortality where they are acutely aware of their finite time on Earth as the possibilities of life are capped by reality and our own decisions.

For a week in first grade, I was intent on being a moose when I grew up. When you are a child anything is possible, life is one big opportunity to do anything and everything. Children don't quite understand it, but these childhood dreams of being an actor, moose, or pilot all take work to realize. So we set out to build up physical, social, and mental skills to open up opportunities. Life before graduation is focused on development, the more we develop the more opportunities the future affords us. Development physically we are growing into our mature biological state with both body and brain. Socially, we have been amassing skills that allow us to function as part of a collective. Mentally we are developing academically, one class building up to the next, our knowledge, problem solving, and critical thinking all transfiguring. As we take more classes we gain skills and become more accredited bringing jobs and other opportunities

into reach. College graduation marks both the arrival of adulthood and the plateau of one's possibilities.

When graduation comes, and growth ceases to occur, the ceiling of one's potential is set. Academically, the majority of people have completed the last class that they will ever take in their lives. Socially the expectation is that graduates are ready to function in the real world. By college graduation, the promises of puberty have been actualized. The end to these forms of growth can be completely ignored, it is an honest conversation you don't need to have with yourself. When a high schooler is cut from the basketball team they are explicitly shown where they stand as a basketball player, that they don't have what it takes is written clearly. When we graduate our potential is much more subtly topped off. You may have done well in your government classes but do you really think you've progressed far enough to become a senator one day? If I'm really honest with myself I will acknowledge that my probability of becoming an astronaut, a moose, or a screenwriter has become exceeding low. An even more honest conversation is that I have graduated but don't have the skills to achieve my dreams. Being honest with yourself is acknowledging that these are all the skills I will ever acquire, and it is not enough. The shiny potential envisioned during our youth, reaching the pinnacle of some form of success, has been replaced by the realistic potential of mediocrity. We preach anything is possible but the immigrant without a high school degree faces similar confines of reality as an elderly man crippled by Parkinsons, the futures of both are full of certainty rather than possibility. We live in a world where the laws of physics are final, but realism is a powerful force. In this way the reality of our situation dictates what will be possible in our life, then, the future is further refined by what we decide to commit to.

Commitment is choosing to embrace one opportunity and laying aside the others, by laying aside opportunities the future narrows. Graduating students have a thick stack of proposals sitting on their desk that they must choose to commit to or throw out. A first real job looms heavy with every inquisition of what you will be up to next year. In choosing what comes after school a person is choosing what they want to pursue, in choosing a passion to pursue they are laying behind others. As I choose to follow a path towards an engineering degree next year, I feel myself digging the grave of a career in comedy, something that brings me the utmost joy, that I had dreams of pursuing. I watch people struggle with the same finality of making a decision as they attempt to be in a committed relationship as a dating app sits in their pockets full of imagined potential. This sacrifice must be made, time and commitment are demanded by every important endeavor. This sacrifice is so difficult because we don't have infinite time, every dream feels so important and worthy of pursuing, and by choosing to do one thing means we might not ever do that other thing. In life, one can set their mind to doing whatever they want but not everything they want. It is the nature of finite existence.

Graduation exposes the ceiling of one's possibilities capped by the reality of development and then forces the shedding of possibilities making recent graduates hyper aware of their impending death as their lives become ever more definite. Beauvoir looked at the lives of the elderly, focusing specifically on habits that the elderly tend to form. Their lives becoming increasingly dominated by habits. When she talks about habits Beauvoir quotes Flaubert on the experience of being old and not being able to fulfill a habit, "Everything that leaves us has the character of that which can never be undone, and you feel the tread of death upon you". In old age commitment to a lifestyle is thrust upon us by physical and mental constraints, which causes the elderly to be very habited. When a habit is lost, say to a physical ailment or the death of a

friend, the change does not open up new opportunities, it leaves the following days less varied. Graduation is a time in life when the same finality of commitment is present. The elderly are aware of death because they have reached the end of the decline of future possibilities. Graduating students are aware of death because they are beginning the decline in possibilities. The shrinking amount of possibilities of what we will do in our life reminds us that we have a limited amount of time on Earth. If we were immortal, the angst of not knowing what to do with our life wouldn't exist. Death cuts life short before we get to do everything we have dreamed of. Choosing what to do with your life is the same as choosing what not to do with your life because of death. Death is the reason freshman in college struggle to choose a major, you can only study one, if we had infinite time we could major in everything. The acute awareness of death can be seen in the similar angst graduating students feel about the future. Forced to make commitments they realize they only have one finite life. Thus, graduation brings students into an intimate awareness of their own death through acknowledgment and decision

What throws a wrench in my analysis is my damn aunt Amy. At 47 years old Amy quit her job and enrolled at Tufts Veterinary school. The work nearly killed her, but at 51, twice the age of her classmates, she fulfilled her childhood dream of becoming a veterinarian. Humans are remarkable creatures full of life and, as my aunt showed, constant possibility. It may be hard, and society not conducive to our lofty pursuits, but one's social, physical, and academic skills can always be practiced and improved. Even though we pursue something the laws of physics don't hold us prisoners to the same career for our whole life. The ability to adapt, dream and persevere are human traits that write beautiful stories such as my aunt's.

While writing this paper I informally interviewed friends of mine that were also graduating and asked the same question: is graduation a form of birth or death. Everyone

eventually made their way to the argument that it is a bit of both. In many ways, graduation reminds us that we are dying but the enormous change enacted by graduation may more accurately be described as highlighting that we are living. The routine of everyday life lulls us into forgetting that we live a finite physical existence, the acceleration of life caused by graduation reminds us of death but also birth, uncertainty, opportunity, and change. When I graduate this year I won't mourn the onset of my inevitable death, I'll celebrate that I am living.