



# THE MERCURY

THE STUDENT ART & LITERARY MAGAZINE OF GETTYSBURG COLLEGE

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Year 2011

Article 14

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1-1-2011

## A Case for the Human Condition

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Class of 2012

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Clark, Austin W. (2011) "A Case for the Human Condition," *The Mercury*: Year 2011, Article 14.

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# A Case for the Human Condition

**Keywords**

creative writing, non-fiction

**Author Bio**

Austin Clark: "My alphabet starts with this letter called yuzz. It's the letter I use to spell yuzz-a-ma-tuzz. You'll be sort of surprised what there is to be found once you go beyond Z and start poking around." - Dr. Seuss

# A CASE FOR THE HUMAN CONDITION

AUSTIN CLARK

My brother is taller than me. This in and of itself is not unusual, but the fact remains that his head noticeably bobs above mine when I am, in fact, a solid two years older. I am tempted to think this would be less of a problem were I a girl. However wrong it is, society holds the stereotype that women should be shorter than their masculine opposites, to the point that a fresh stereotype has been developed; one of the the tall, laid back younger brother with his shorter, more mature, sister. This, of course, is of no condolence to me. There is still a shred of that old standard of masculinity fluttering in the cultural breezes, demanding that the eldest be the best and tallest. I take comfort, though, in the fact that I am stouter, stronger and more scrappily Canadian than he is.

This fact doesn't appear to cross his mind nearly as much as it sails across mine. Nor the fact that he is smarter, funnier, more easy-going and on the whole more attractive to women than I am. He takes it all in stride (who wouldn't?) while I will kick my feet up on the edge of a table and muse on the ephemeral whys.

Of course, this is only the beginning. My brother and I are separate people, despite how much we look alike and acted when we were younger. If someone called, we would both go scurrying, even if the summons was for only one of us. That was then. Now our interests have split like the interstate highway going around a city, traveling in two different directions, with the only common ground being a maze of crowded blocks, skyscrapers and one way streets. This complexity comes out, I think, in no greater detail than when we talk about People.

Perhaps a little background is in order to put some perspective on this conflict. My brother, while a wonderful human being, was born with an astronomical intelligence and a mind tilted so dramatically to the left that when it snows, small children (and myself) are sometimes tempted to go sledding down the steep inclined plane. This is not the political Left, of course, not the capitalized Left (in fact, in the arena of politics my brother's mind is slanted almost as much in the opposite direction,) but the theoretical left brain, the dominant side of the brain. Which is to say, he is good at math. He wants to be an engineer, actually. Or a physicist. But my father (an engineer) has warned him against that, because apparently all physicists have terrible eating habits. I still remember the time playing spectator in his advanced physics class in high school, though, when the teacher wrote a problem on the board, began to explain how to solve it and reiterate the steps that should be taken to solve it. He had hardly finished writing the

problem on the board when my brother had not only solved it (he anticipated the question), but found another, easier way to solve it, using just as sound mathematical principles.

As you can imagine, this puts my brother and me at different ends of the academic spectrum. I am speaking to you about the sundry whys of the world through this essay, he is running calculations and breaking down machines that will probably solve some of the world's problems. So I suppose it stands to reason that when we talk about People, we have somewhat contrasting opinions. We do not talk about People often. People we know, more often, but People as in the common spectrum of humanity, very rarely.

In keeping with his mathematically oriented, left-slanting brain, my brother looks at the world in a very scientific light. Science has taught him, and many others, that the world works according to a set of rules, that everything can be broken down, predicted. To science and to my brother, there is a way to collapse everything into a set of numbers, to a code almost, even if that way has yet to be discovered. He firmly believes that humanity will discover it. He has told me in no uncertain terms that when it comes down to it, there is an equation for everything, from the turning of the universe to the tiniest synapse in the human brain. From there, he concluded to me on one occasion, rocking his chair while I lay concernedly on the couch next to him, it is possible to predict everything.

For my part, I could hardly disagree more.

\*

Let's stop for a moment and do a thought experiment. Imagine, if you will, you wrote down a list of everything that defines you: physical traits, attitudes, quirks, loves, grievances, hobbies, talents, everything—down to the last detail you could possibly think of. Red hair, shoe size seven (US), stoic, hates the sounds of crickets, loves the game of cricket, good at math, any little detail you can dredge up. This list would be long, huge, enormous, taking up more paper (and more time to write) than you could even contemplate using.

Now imagine your neighbor did this. And then his neighbor. Everyone in the whole world, from the child soldiers in rural Africa, to the Asian bigwigs in their Shanghai skyscrapers, to the man with a white picket fence in Levittown, wrote out this list of themselves. Comparing all these lists, these billions of lists, could you find someone who is exactly you?

The answer is no. Even if you miraculously found someone who was your doppelganger, (from the red hair to the hatred of chirruping insects,) in every way shape or form according to this list, you would always find you forgot something, some seemingly insignificant thing about yourself that makes you separate. That, to me, is the beauty of humanity.

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Humanity, I have found, cannot be categorized. Trust me, I have

spent large amounts of time, observation and unscientific experimentation to this end. Come to think about, you probably have, too. Actually, you almost certainly have. It's unpleasant, I know, but we have all at some point or another passed judgment on some group or someone unthinkingly, placing them in a broadly defined and, quite frankly, vague group of people because of something they have or haven't done.

That's the crass side of it though. We've all indulged. If you haven't, well, power to you and, in the immortal words of Clint Eastwood, "Get off my lawn." I don't want you and your perfections here. Shoo.

For some reason, despite the foregone conclusion of failure, I always attempt to categorize people. Even in high school, I began to measure the qualities of my compatriots and to place them in certain sections. Jocks, nerds, preps and hippies were all terms I'd appropriated at one point or other to group people under. Granted, this was basically pseudo-scientific stereotyping, as I tended to let (and to use, at some points, I must confess) these developing categories govern social interactions. But I had one consistent problem. People kept jumping categories on me.

What do you do about the pot-smoking video-gamer? Is he a nerd or a hippie? Or both? Maybe he's a subset, a different category in his own right. Of course, that would depend on how many more there were like him (upon further inspection, this proved to be the majority of the video-gaming club.)

Or what about Mr. Valedictorian? He can run track, throw down people in wrestling, write essays and take Algebra III at the local college all with equal aplomb. I called him a scholar-jock. This moniker sounds faintly ridiculous, but that's the only think I could think of at the time.

These were hardly isolated instances. Whenever I sat down to seriously think about it, even those I knew the best were suddenly jumping like fish; sometimes landing with a perfunctory splash in a different category or subcategory, but most of the time flopping down in one, rolling their eyes lazily up at me before another spasm of personality compelled them to flip into another. Categorization, even the act of categorization, tends to fall apart under really close scrutiny. There are too many people doing too many crazy things.

People continue to surprise.

You can pass judgment, you can talk about their jobs or country of origin, but you can't categorize them. It's basically impossible. I have learned the wisdom of Nick Carraway in the opening of *The Great Gatsby* when he tells us, "I'm inclined to reserve all judgments, a habit that has opened up many curious natures to me and also made me the victim of not a few veteran bores." If you don't believe that, try it out sometime.

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While this exact idea is not, strictly speaking, what my brother is arguing against, the whole issue of categorization just leads to a finer point, one that is a step up in vocabulary—though perhaps a step down in scale—

otherwise known as quantification. By reducing things to a set of numbers and equations, as my brother proposes, you are quantifying it. Labels being stuck on, tiny scratches on a page or pixels on a computer screen that stand for more than the physical space they take up. Thus, the phenomenon my brother proposes is nothing less than the possibility of an all-out quantification of humanity.

For my part, I find this idea absolutely abhorrent.

Humanity, of course, can be scientifically categorized to a degree.

Despite our subtle differences, humanity still has many broad things in common which science, both hard and soft, has done an admirable job (at least, more admirable than me) of categorizing. The whole Linnaean classification system, taught to all of us in the tender years of high school (interestingly enough, when I first began my efforts), works wonders when one is trying to understand and break down just about everything natural in the world. Humanity even has a little niche and a nice tidy little Latinate name, *homo sapiens*, to help set us apart.

Yet this is where the tidy little package of classification should, in all consciousness, end. When science begins to delve too deeply into humanity, to try to apply half-understood (and half-formulated it seems) theories of brain science, to string physics and colorful photometric images, to explain exactly why it is that you hate someone, smile at your cute neighbor or believe in God, it crosses the line. It is at this point when it becomes the proverbial fool who rushes in where other philosophies fear to tread. Despite how neatly science can classify us in the grand scheme of things, put us on a chart and waggle fingers in our direction, it can not and should not try to explain us. But it does.

That is a terrible pitfall of science.

This categorization and explanation of humanity.

This knowing, but not believing.

This idea that mankind can fully understand the depths of his own soul.

"That man can be conscious of himself in his contemplation raises him infinitely above all other living creatures on earth," wrote the German philosopher Immanuel Kant. This then, is the not-so-subtle irony of science. Not satisfied with merely putting humanity on the map the great cartographer of nature has set out, science turns its inquiry inward, proposing that mankind is *just* an animal (itself a broad classification), something that can be explained or broken down, oblivious to the notion which Herr Kant so simply expresses; simply that the act of looking inward, of being conscious of oneself, sets us irrevocably apart. Science, unfortunately, at its purest and in some ways most snobbish, refuses to acknowledge one simple factor in the history of mankind: the human condition.

Mankind. Kind of a misnomer isn't it? Humanity is not all men



and certainly isn't all that kind. But regardless of the actual nomenclature, we as humans are defined not by where we stand on a chart or by meager and trivial categorization attempts on the part of scientists, psychologists, anthropologists or luckless historians, but by the one thing we do possess that cannot be defined: this human condition. It is what sets us apart as an entity, the propensity to do what we will, regardless of what science or culture might theoretically dictate. This indefatigable human spirit that cannot be traced.

Humanity cannot be quantified, only qualified, in spite of what my brother believes. One of the (few) things astronomy has taught me is the link between quantification and predictability. *Quantification*, my short, bubbly and rudely atheistic astronomy professor enthused in front of a class of bored students, gives us predictive power. Reducing the orbits of planets to a set of numbers and symbols I could scribble in my notebook (and be tested on) allowed names greater than mine to create schedules of moon phases decades in advance and gauge the threat levels of incoming asteroids. Useful, I guess, to astronomy, but almost completely void when it comes to humanity.

If my brother believes humans can be quantified, then I will always have to stand opposite him, no matter how tall he is. Quantification means predictive power, (something I cannot even write without conjuring images of the perky little professor dancing in front of the class) and we will never have predictive power when it comes to ourselves. That is part, if not the entirety of, the human condition. It is the condition of unpredictability, almost, the unknown that sets us apart from other animals, not simply quantifiable genetic codes or patterns of behavior. This capacity to defy logic and explanation, for better or for worse, is what makes us a species apart.

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Humans have broken our own expectations of ourselves, undermined our closest principles. It's impossible to put a man on the moon people once said, or to climb Mt. Everest, the highest peak in the world. Yet Neil Armstrong took that one small step, and Sir Edmund Hillary won his title by pulling himself up one last, not so small, step.

Throughout time, humanity has defied its own expectations of itself. *Never invade Russia*, the old rule of thumb goes, *you'll never win*. Yet Subutai, at the instruction of his superior, Ghengis Khan, did just that, in a season, long before the axiom was ever coined and with a small army whose horses outnumbered its men at least two to one. In the process, of course, he also nabbed the supermajority of the Eurasian continent, including the equally intimidating China and even the "Graveyard of Empires."

As a fledgling historian, one of the greatest pet peeves I have always had with my own discipline are those who ignore or downplay the impact of the individual on history. I do not mean to say I subscribe to Thomas Carlyle's exaggerated Great Man Theory. There, he postulates that men

exist who are morally and spiritually above all others and are entitled to kill, oppress and do what are generally considered to be mean and nasty things in the name of a greater good for humanity that only they can achieve. But I do not specifically endorse the overextended counter-argument either. Anthropologists, sociologists and psychologists (and probably a whole bunch of other —ologists that I don't remember) straight-jacket their own understanding of humanity with one unique word:

**Culture-** *a shared and negotiated system of meaning informed by knowledge that people learn and put into practice by interpreting experience and generating behavior.*

Historians in the latter part of the past century have, not ignobly, become enamored with this idea and sought to include it in their work. They have done so with a large degree of success, but at the cost of writing out what is traditionally known as the “grand narrative”: the history of political decision, wars and typically white men. This “New History” or “New Left” (to couch it in political terms) has by and large developed a phobia of the scope of war, politics and individuals that have dominated historiography since the invention of the written word. Determined to let the unmentioned masses get their share of page space in the (often dry) historical literature, they have varnished history and its study with this anthropological “culture.”

I read, during one of the two times I took my SAT's, about how a recent trend in history involved knocking famous people off their pedestals. It was not until the scores I earned on those drawn out and dusty tests bore fruit that I fully comprehended what that meant. New historians were either going out of their way to demolish the famous or layering culture on so thick in their writing, like an overenthusiastic baker frosting a delicate wedding cake, that there was no room for anyone to be anything but average. This, I feel, is wrong.

People are not perfect. Environment, as all the —ologists claim, does play a huge role in shaping a person. But that does not mean there are no great men and women, or even downright exceptions to the various rules. Humanity does not create culture with one mind. The experiences being interpreted and the behavior being generated depend solely on the individual interpreting or generating them, and how it happens to interact with the interpretation and generation being done by family, friends, or strange old men living down the street.

Man is not, strictly speaking, an animal of his culture. There is in every human being, a Freudian ego, an *I*, which acts in its own unique and varied manner. You can never quite predict, as some anthropologists and sociologists claim to do, what a man is going to do based on his culture. Martin Luther, after all, split a church and divided a continent into factions that still draw blood today because, for some inscrutable reason, he questioned and thought and nailed ideas to doors in a cultural environment that very much frowned on such a thing. Japan, in the space of fifty years or so, yanked their entire society and country into modernity, suppressing many



still-dominant values of the older feudal culture.

I do believe that New History has its place. There are people, places, movements and ideas that the "grand narrative" has trodden over unjustly. It is worth knowing that Thomas Jefferson kept slaves and slept with them. But that is not say that we should respect him any less for the achievements he made and the honor he won, or write him off as merely another eccentric "Founding Father" that American culture has idolized in its pursuit of identity. He was not perfect; perhaps he could not be perfect. He was only *homo sapien*.

After all, isn't the bad in us part of the human condition also? The anger, the shortsighted stupidity, the desire to sleep with our servants, the motivation to do what we want despite the warning bells going off in our head or the obvious detriment it will bring to society? Tragic, is it not, that so many college students, riding into higher learning on the back of scholarship money, willfully choose to drink until they blackout and wake up and stumble and maybe fail a class early the next morning? And the poor old Habsburgs, ignoring the natural instinct to breed with someone outside their gene pool, a rule that the lowest rabbit knows, end up bent, crippled with a chin I could hang my coat on?

Peculiar isn't it, that Lear divides his kingdom, that Macbeth kills yet again, Othello envies and Hamlet dallies? Isn't there something like us in all of these figures, who do what they do and die because of it, when it all could have been avoided by listening to a fool, a ghost, or a friend?

Mankind can be great, but it can also be tragic. What it truly cannot be is predicted. With only a small leap of logic (I believe scientists refer to this as an "inverse something-or-rather"), it can be safely assumed that if humanity cannot be predicted, then it cannot be quantified. Hence, why my brother sits in the rocking chair and I on the couch while we discuss such matters. Our beliefs on the subject are so subtly yet so diametrically opposed that sitting in even a relatively parallel manner would be akin to tiptoeing around a mine field. It takes only one misread assertion, one lapse in argument etiquette, to explode the chain of differences that separate my brother and me.

There is a cartoon, posted on the bulletin board next to the door to one of the science professor's offices. Most other college professors only get the large, blank, inorganic expanse of the door to personalize and make their own, but professors of science get a bulletin board as well. This professor has adorned part of the bulletin board with a cartoon, whose champion is the Zeus-looking God-Man. Over the course of the cartoon, God-Man plays a largely inconsequential role in the creation of a human being, with science setting up the specifics of the man's attitudes and tendencies and with culture putting him in an awkward situation. Towards the end, God-Man does step in to confront the evil situation in the man's life, but is ultimately retired to the God-Cave.

While it is quite obviously a satirical cartoon on Creationism and religion in general (the sarcasm of the piece almost leaned forward and gave me a bloody nose), I find it to be nothing more than a loud coverage for weakness, much like the politician who, in order to throw attention off his own flaws, attempts to highlight his opponent's. Throughout the cartoon, God-Man is secondary to science, watching as it creates genes and nerve synapses and sets up evil situations for the poor character. Yet in the end, when the conflict comes to a head, when evil strikes and the situation grows critical, it is God-Man who resolves it, not the science that has taken up three quarters of the page. It seems a crucial irony that science can explain everything, every factor that leads up to being human, but when it comes down to resolving what it means to be human, the crucible of action, science is powerless and only the satirized God-Man can do anything.

I don't know that I would take religion over science in a heartbeat, or that I even believe there is actually a choice. But I do know that I would accept that indefinable human condition as an explanation, however vague, in less than that time. I would like to point my brother at this cartoon and explain to him the value of the human condition. Science cannot explain everything. Especially not the most important thing.

"For now," he would say.

"Forever," I would argue.

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So how does this end, all this talk about the human condition? It doesn't. It's not that this essay will go on forever (for some of you it undoubtedly already has), but that the human condition is being played out constantly, being defined by you, me, your neighbor, your boss and even the man who slices your pastrami at the deli counter. We are all human, all possess that indefinable trait that makes us so and because of that, no essay ever written on the subject can be truly exhaustive.

So maybe we should all be able to hear the wisdom in Shakespeare's words when Hamlet says, quite simply:

*"What a piece of work is man."*

*-Hamlet (II.ii.303)*