

The Big Ideas Content Summary 2018 (Up-to-date as of July 2018)

Humans have always been engaged in a search for wisdom — a deeper understanding of the world, the universe and their own minds. Despite a rapidly changing society and daily life, that pursuit continues. [The Stone](#) — The New York Times’s forum for contemporary philosophers — will bring together the world’s leading thinkers to contemplate one theme in The Big Ideas.

This year’s question: What Does It Mean to Be “Human” Today?

The package contains 10 to 12 essays, about 800 to 1,200 words each, with author headshots and photos or illustrations with each essay. All essays are embargoed until 12:01 AM EASTERN TIME ON August 25, 2018.

Please note that the summaries and word counts below are subject to change.

BC-BI-CLARK-2018-ART-NYTSF

By Andy Clark

This is a world of remarkable personal and social possibility. Sharing and group solidarity are now easier than ever before, and the communal mapping of new electronic trails is enabling multiple once-hidden demographics to command social, commercial and political respect. It’s a world where human intelligence itself is poised for repair and reinvention. And one whose bedrock nature is itself becoming fluid, as digital overlays augment reality with personalized pointers (the information-rich cousins of the contemporary elves and pixies of Pokémon Go). It’s also a world permeated by a growing swath of alien intelligences (just ask Alexa, although she won’t really admit it). As we blur boundaries between body and machine, mind and world, human and post-human, we face endless new possible ways of being. ... I think this is a moment to be savored, even as we sound new notes of care and caution about the speed, nature and range of these changes.

1,050 words

(Andy Clark is a philosophy professor at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland and the former director of the Cognitive Science Program at Indiana University Bloomington.)

BC-BI-IYER-2018-ART-NYTSF

By Pico Iyer

I’ve never doubted that humanity is a privilege, even if we, as the animals who think, are also the creatures who agitate, plot and fantasize. Governments try to suppress this at times, and many of us in the freer world now imprison ourselves by choosing to live through screens, or to see

through screens, like the Buddhist demagogue Ashin Wirathu who, in defiance of the shared humanness that the Buddha worked so hard to elucidate, compares his Muslim neighbors in Myanmar to wolves and jackals. More and more of us these days seem to be living at post-human speeds determined by machines, to the point where we barely have time for kids or friends. But if we're feeling less than human — or pretending we can engineer mortality away — for most of us it's a choice we're making, and can unmake tomorrow.

1,230 words

(Pico Iyer is the author of many books, including “The Man Within My Head,” “The Art of Stillness” and the forthcoming “Autumn Light,” a book on Japan.)

BC-BI-NUSSBAUM-2018-ART-NYTSF

By Martha C. Nussbaum

We humans are very self-focused. We tend to think that being human is somehow very special and important, so we ask about that, instead of asking what it means to be an elephant, or a pig, or a bird. This failure of curiosity is part of a large ethical problem. The question, “What is it to be human?” is not just narcissistic, it involves a culpable obtuseness. It is rather like asking, “What is it to be white?” It connotes unearned privileges that have been used to dominate and exploit. But we usually don't recognize this because our narcissism is so complete.

960 words

(Martha C. Nussbaum is currently the Ernst Freund Distinguished Service Professor of Law and Ethics and the University of Chicago. She is the author of over 20 books, and has explored topics including Greek and Roman philosophy, political theory, feminism, literature and animal rights.)

BC-BI-ARIEFF-2018-ART-NYTSF

By Allison Arieff

Our time here is but a blip and when we leave, the great world continues to spin. As such, our appreciation of our own lives has much to do with our ever-increasing awareness of its relative brevity. It is this — an awareness and acceptance of our own mortality — that makes us human. And, it is the impetus, I'd argue, for living our lives to the fullest. ... Technological breakthroughs that preserve memory and push away death may change the way we live. But our humanity — our humanness — is inextricably intertwined with our mortality. And no scientific fountain of youth can ever cause that to change.

800 words

(Allison Arieff is the editorial director of the urban planning and policy think tank SPUR, and has been a contributing opinion writer for The New York Times since 2006. She is the author of the books “Prefab” and “Trailer Travel: A Visual History of Mobile America.”)

BC-BI-LEVY-2018-ART-NYTSF

By Bernard Henri-Lévy

To be human means to make the leap, whatever it may be, out of the natural order. It is to escape, in one way or another, from this mass of atoms, cells and particles, from which I am also composed. It is to be endowed with a supplement of soul which, even if it is immaterial, without expanse nor density, even if it is perfectly invisible, impalpable, inconsistent, will be my true passport towards the human essence. . . . One is not born a human, but becomes one. It is not a steady state, delivered once and for all, it is a process.

1,230 words

(Bernard Henri-Lévy is considered one of France's pre-eminent public intellectuals. He was one of the leaders of the Nouveaux Philosophes, a group of philosophers who broke with Marxism in the 1970s, and is the author of several books.)

BC-BI-LOSKUTOFF-2018-ART-NYTSF

By Maxim Loskutoff

In the summer of 2012, the same year that scientists fully decoded the genome of the bonobo, the last great ape, my partner and I were stalked by a female grizzly bear. . . . To be human today is to deny our animal nature, though it's always there, as the earth remains round beneath our feet even when it feels flat. I had always been an animal, and would always be one, but it wasn't until I was prey, my own fur standing on end and certain base-level decisions being made in milliseconds, that the meat-and-bone reality settled over me. I was smaller and slower than the bear. My claws were no match for hers. And almost every part of me was edible.

My partner looked at me. I looked at her. We turned and sprinted back into the trees the way we'd come.

930 words

(Maxim Loskutoff is the author of "Come West and See." He lives in Montana.)

BC-BI-ADEBAYO-2018-ART-NYTSF

By Ayobami Adebayo

Grief and the ways we deal with it, both individually and as communities, remains a vital part of our human experience, inextricably intertwined with the highs of love and affection. In some ways the beloved is also the bereaved-in-waiting, and just as in the course of our lives we wish people well as they graduate, marry or reach some other milestone, eventually we will find ourselves struggling to find the appropriate way to commiserate with loved ones when a member of our community achieves that final, inescapable one.

1,070 words

(Ayobami Adebayo is a writer from Nigeria. She is the author of "Stay With Me.")

BC-BI-CRITCHLEY-2018-ART-NYTSF

By Simon Critchley

What does being a soccer fan teach us about being human? A lot more than Ancestry DNA, as it turns out. Soccer gives us a lived experience of community with fellow fans. It provides a history

to that experience and a robust feeling of identity, place and belonging, even when that belonging is virtual, circulating through television screens and across social media networks. ... Happily, despite all the horrors of the world, human beings are playful creatures who are able to give themselves over to games, engaging in them and watching them. Play is both a relief and a release from the pressure of reality, but also a way of engaging that reality, indirectly, lightly, joyfully.

1,720 words

(Simon Critchley is the Hans Jonas Professor of Philosophy at New York City's New School for Social Research. The author of many works, his most recent books are "The Problem with Levinas" and "ABC of Impossibility.")

BC-BI-WEIWEI-2018-ART-NYTSF

By Ai Weiwei

There is no such thing as a human being in the abstract. Only when we look at people as embedded in their experiences, having their own social positions, educations and memories, and pursuing their own ideals, can the question "What is a human being?" fully make sense. Everyone seems to agree that we live today in a completely distinctive time. We may use different labels for it — the era of globalization, of the internet, of late capitalism, of the collapse of Cold War ideology — but all such terms seek to describe the world's new situation. The most striking feature of that situation is that we are much freer than ever before in our access to information, knowledge and the assistance of technology. At the same time, the forces that tend to constrict our personal freedoms — states, religions, ethnic identities, economic interest groups and others — are both dissolving and reorganizing. Some are dying while others are growing extraordinarily strong.

600 words

(Ai Weiwei is a Chinese contemporary artist who uses a wide range of media to express new ways for his audiences to examine society and its values. He is the recipient of the lifetime achievement award from the Chinese Contemporary Art Awards in 2008 and the Vaclav Havel Prize for Creative Dissent from the Human Rights Foundation in 2012.)

BC-BI-WOJCICKI-2018-ART-NYTSF

By Anne Wojcicki

DNA is like a codebook that contains the story of human genetic history, demonstrating how connected we are both to each other and to other forms of life on Earth. I am passionate about deciphering the code and understanding exactly how those four letters, having evolved over millions of years, account for the spectacular diversity among the world's species. It is incredibly exciting to study life's blueprint during a time when it is within our grasp to understand what it really means. We must also recognize, however, that humans differ from other living creatures in a fundamental way: Humans have the ability to imagine, innovate and create. This ability has allowed us to pioneer in extraordinary ways, but it has also led to impacts on the rest of our

global community. So what makes us human? Although there is a clear scientific definition of the human species, our chemical foundations are no different than those of other earthly organisms. So rather than fixating on the differences, I focus on the similarities. Ultimately though, humans are differentiated from the rest of life on Earth by our ability to think and advance.

700 words

(Anne Wojcicki is a co-founder of 23andMe, a personal genomics and biotechnology company.)

BC-BI-STORR-2018-ART-NYTSF

By Will Storr

Between 1965 and 1985, the Western self transformed. We turned from anti-materialistic, screw-the-man hippies into ‘greed is good’ yuppies. We’d be surprised if an individual went through such a comical metamorphosis. But an entire culture did. What could’ve caused such a dramatic shift? Whilst the origins of such changes can’t be reduced to a single source, I believe we can point to one that’s dominant. The economy. In the early 1980s, President Ronald Reagan of the United States and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher rewrote the rules by which we had had to live in order to get by. And that, with stunning rapidity, changed who we were. ...

Humans want to get along and get ahead and will become whoever they need to be in order to do so. In the 21st century, those rules are no longer set by our physical landscape. Today, the deep and enormously powerful controlling force is the economy.

1,190 words

(Will Storr is an award-winning novelist of four critically acclaimed books and a journalist who has covered everything from the civil war in South Sudan to the remote Aboriginal communities in Australia.)

BC-BI-TURKLE-2018-ART-NYTSF

By Sherry Turkle

Machines can perform empathy in a conversation about your friend, your mother, your child, your lover. But they have no experience of any of these relationships. Their conversations about life occupy the realm of the as-if. To be human today is to be the object of the mass marketing of simulation, and to have the wisdom to fight back and defend what’s real. The machines that are programmed to talk with us have not known the arc of a human life. They cannot put themselves in our place. They feel nothing of the human loss or love we describe to them, nor do they realize that they are merely programmed to describe back to us. What is most important about being human today? The struggle to stay human.

940 words

(Sherry Turkle is a professor in the program in Science, Technology and Society at M.I.T. She is the author of “Reclaiming Conversation” and “Alone Together”, both of which deal with a critique of sociable robotics.)

BC-BI-SCRANTON-2018-ART-NYTSF

By Roy Scranton

Five hundred years ago, the people who lived here did not believe in progress. They did not believe in individual liberty, the autonomous self, the freedom of markets, human rights, the state or the concept of nature as something distinct from culture. They lived for generations without electricity, refrigeration, automobiles and Wi-Fi. They were almost entirely wiped out in the centuries-long campaign of displacement and genocide that forms the through-line of North American history from 1492 to the end of the Apache Wars in 1886. The paucity of historical evidence and the eradication of native peoples' culture by European colonizers make it difficult to reconstruct precontact indigenous life in all its detail. What evidence there is, combined with anthropological insights into similarly premodern cultures, strongly suggests that despite having to persevere without the miraculous comforts, devices and potions upon which we thoughtlessly depend, they almost certainly lived lives at least as meaningful, complex, rich and joyful as our own.

1,040 words

(Roy Scranton is an assistant professor of English at the University of Notre Dame. He is the author of "Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of a Civilization" and the novel "War Porn.")

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