

# Astonishing Tale Unfolds at UNH!

## Philosopher considers the wonder of existence

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[Philosophy](#) professor [Timm Triplett](#) reckons that the odds of his ever being born were so incredibly, so unimaginably long that the 360 million-to-one odds of winning the lottery “seem like a slam-dunk by comparison.” He’s not exaggerating, but he is challenging others to take a moment to reflect on what he calls the “astonishing unlikelihood, for each of us, that we would ever come to exist.”

The topic has long fascinated him. When he was seven years old, he asked his father about the birds and bees and listened,

spellbound, to the answer. “I remember my dad telling me I came from the union of a sperm and an egg, and that there were millions of sperm and that if any other sperm had fertilized the egg, I would not exist. It was stunning for a boy of my age to hear this.”

The sheer wonder of his existence swirled around in his head and, eventually, the boy whose mother thought he was destined to become a philosopher, became one, and picked up the line of inquiry he began with his father. The author of dozens



PROFESSOR TIMM TRIPLETT  
(PHOTO BY PERRY SMITH).

of papers geared to fellow philosophers on topics such as theory of knowledge, morality and many other queries, Triplett eschewed taking the academic journal route for his inquiry into the improbability of one’s existence, opting instead to enter a more public realm in the online journal Aeon, where he published an article called “[You’re Astonishing!](#)”

The essay argues that our existence is astonishing when we compare ourselves not to others who, like us, have been given the get-out-of-oblivion-free pass, but to “all those possible people who might have been born instead of me.” All we have to do is drill down just a little bit to see how unlikely our existence is. Our parents had to meet each other, but so did both sets of their parents and so on back to when our ancestors clung to the hairy backs of their mommas and swung from trees. When you add all of these possibilities on top of the sperm and egg scenario, well, you have a feat that even Debbie Downer would have to marvel at.

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publish in Aeon was that the journal offers a comment section, and thus far Triplett has received several dozen comments. Triplett was ready for them, in part because he devoted much of the article to posing standard philosophical objections to his idea and challenging them.

For example, to the “no-nonsense naturalist” who argues that the “chain of events leading to your conception followed the laws of physics,

chemistry and biology,” Triplett counters, “Okay, have your determinism. But don’t you think it’s just a little bit astonishing that out of the infinite number of ways such laws might have interacted to create any of an infinite number of individuals, here you are?”

Or, take the case of different deterministic argument offered by a theist who argues that “God has a plan for everyone.” Even if the deity knows in advance who will come into existence, isn’t it astonishing that we, with all of our upfront imperfections, would be chosen to be inscribed in the good book?

“Instead of taking the fact of our existence for granted,” offered Triplett, “consider what can be said for the idea that each of us should upon reflection be utterly astonished about our own existence – happily astonished if we are happy with our lives.” The key concept in all of this, Triplett emphasizes, is human subjectivity. “Each of us has a point of view from which we view the world, distinct from the objective perspective, and also distinct from the subjective perspectives of others.”

Given our subjectivity, it is appropriate for us to be astonished by our existence.

Triplett argues that astonishment not

only offers joy and meaning, it also serves the moral purpose of leading us to be more grateful for our own luck and to “alleviate lack of joy when we see it in others.”

## Child’s Play

Another practical application of teaching the appropriateness of emotions such as astonishment comes in the field of childhood education. Triplett is a member of the [Philosophy for Children](#) (p4c) movement, one of the founders of which was his thesis director Gareth Matthews, author of “Philosophy and the Young Child.” “Gary traveled around schools and talked to children and found many of them not only curious in a philosophical way, but good, thoughtful philosophers,” explained Triplett. If teaching could include philosophical exercises in the curriculum, argues Matthews, perhaps “teachers could tap into students’ sense of wonder and help them become more creative and critical thinkers — more open minded.”

Triplett says he has done his own work with middle school and high school students in New Hampshire, exploring topics such as infinity, courage and freedom and enjoying the moments “when they take opposing stands and make their case to their fellow students.”

“People think of philosophical inquiry as a dry, intellectual exercise until they actually do it,” says Triplett. “Then you see how emotions such as wonder, pride, empathy and, yes, astonishment come into play alongside the logic. Not to be able to feel these

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WRITTEN [Dave Moore](#) | Freelance Writer

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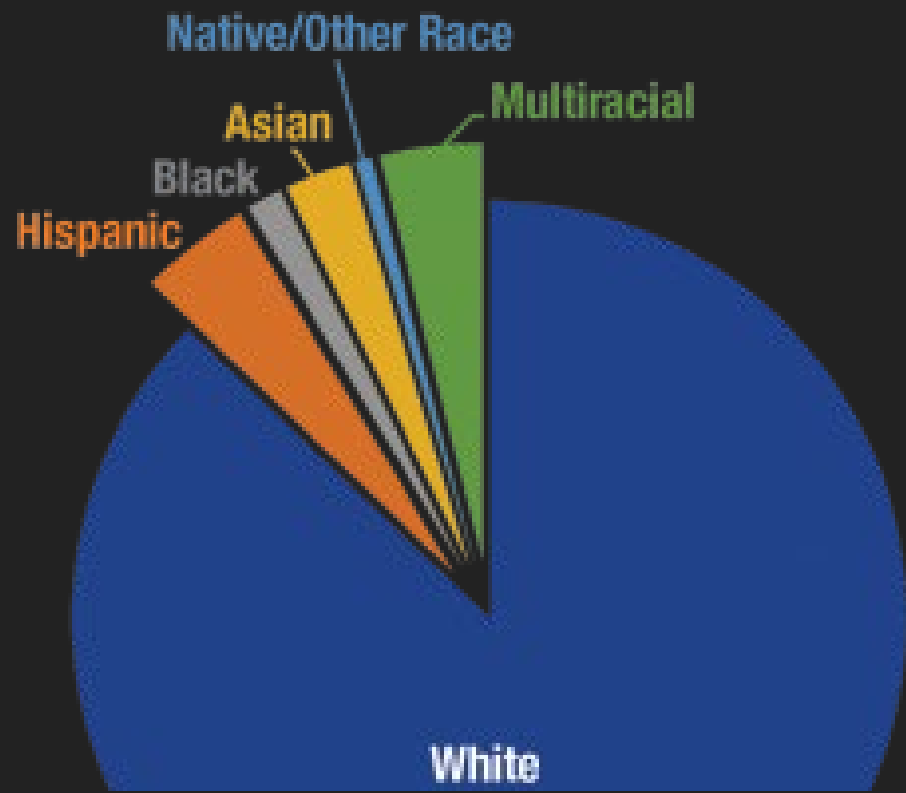


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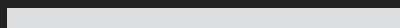
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