We live our lives by our clocks, calendars, and alarms; forever at the whim of the massive machinery of society’s definition and application of time. But time should no longer be viewed from afar as a deeply conceptual being. It must be taken from society’s unyielding grip and shared between the individual and society. The role of time in life is to allow individuals to pursue passions with the pressure of death far over the horizon. However, death should not be viewed this far away and the past and future may have far too much bearing on the present time in contemporary society. Our society transforms people’s appreciation of time into a constricting and weighty entity. Wielded as an abstract concept, time bears a diminished importance and prevents a reevaluation of its uses by the average person.

Time bears no importance for infants who sole focus is on food, love, and other primal needs. However, the few habitual activities of infants are classified by society with time in their title, such as ‘nap time’, to denote the frequency with which they occur. This categorization of different acts, coupled with the word time, suggests that society finds the idea of performing an action for a duration of time appealing and seeks to organize it in a universally understandable fashion. The unaware infant and later child observes their life without much reflection on the past (if they remember it at all), and if so, without an emphasis on its effect on their life. Furthermore, children do not look to the long-term future and begin to pinpoint dates in time that will have value to them because of the value society puts on them. For example, a child will start to care about the date of their birthday and focus on its occurrence, even if it has no relevant bearing on their present actions. This phenomenon continues into early adolescence and a dramatic shift from an infant totally absorbed in the present, to a child gaining a perception of their past, future, and the impact of either on their present life, occurs.

Entering preschool, kindergarten, and then elementary school, the young child discovers how their lives revolve and are structured around society’s notions of time. There is a designated ‘play time’, ‘work time’, and the apparently still necessary ‘nap time’. The child lives entirely subject to the whims of adults around him/her and must go to specific places, to do certain actions, at different times. Society’s control of a child’s life and its grounding in its notion time is absurd. Children are individuals pressed to the grindstone of society’s time. Their existence hinges upon the structures society has put in place to control the way they live. Society has adopted a five day work week and two day weekend. Therefore, children must go to school for every five days of the week and then are rewarded with two days of time to do whatever they want with. Their actions, and as we will later see, their emotions, will change based upon each day of the week that society has imposed to create an order for education and industry to function in. Thus, as children become aware of the value of their time and look forward to doing an action at a certain time, they are trained to reject ideas that any time of day could be ‘nap time’ or ‘work time’. Ridiculous as this may seem, children are stripped of their individuality before they are aware of it and consequently fall into step with how society decides to appropriate each child’s time spent doing something. Society’s control of a child’s time is evidently rejected as the elementary school children graduate to middle school.

Usually starting in middle school, children decide to use their time more as they see fit, much to society’s vexation. Whether it is sleeping class or working during lunch, children begin to explore different uses of their time as they fight the constrained schedule society imposes on them. Their interest may differ from the subjects they attend in school; they may not work best in the morning, or are hungry at the prescribed time for lunch. Society neglects to give young individuals the opportunity to use most of their time as they see fit. This has obvious benefits, such as providing the ground work for an advanced education and the development of social skills. However, in this modern world there are many negative consequences that arise from society’s determination of how children should use their time.

Children meet stiff resistance to their attempts to change their weekly schedule. Although initially it may be hard to challenge society’s structure of our time, the advent of iPhones, computers, and televisions help adolescents re-appropriate their time and how it is used. A child that wishes to stay up all night, to the consternation of his/her parents and society, now may do so while being connected to like-minded friends, or sucked from reality and distracted from sleep, hunger, or other bodily needs. Deemed a disagreeable use of time by society, this all-night affair may be greatest chance the child has to explore his/her individuality of the week. Free from the constraints of school, extracurricular activities, and parents, the child can develop their own sense of time and its value from how they decide to use it. Gone are the assertions by the education system that an hour of time is the best length of time to learn a part of a subject, a child may spend four hours studying one subject and become infatuated with it on their own time. Society mistakenly attempts more and more to structure every hour of the day neglecting the nuances of different individuals and their capacity to understand and appreciate time themselves.

Society’s failure to recognize the importance of young person’s need to develop their own sense of time is reflected in the very way it defines time. Time is defined by seasons and weather patterns, honed by the advances of science into a very clinical and abstract creation. This definition of time lacks understanding for the way people of different ages perceive it. The young mind of a child has yet to be impressed by adult perception of time and therefore one whole year for a ten year old seems an unfathomably long time (ten percent of their life). Moreover, for an adult of fifty years old is a minute portion of their existence (only two percent of their life). Therefore, it is absurd to expect a ten year old and fifty year old to measure their time on Earth by the same standard, convenient it may be. When a ten year old is told within a year that they will be able to walk to school alone, this future goal seems shrouded in the mists of time, impossibly far away and mysteriously cloaked in the unknown. For the fifty year old telling them this, the year is a drop in the bucket of time, and, from their own experience, may be something buried far in the past. Furthermore, the fifty year old probably pondering his/her use of time far more than the ten year old. The two very different perceptions of time indicate that time and its use should not be measured on a standard system scaled more for society than the individual.

In high school, the change in a person’s perception of time is felt more acutely than ever because of new experiences and relationships with society’s previous structuring of time. The passage of time is not only measured relative to the duration a person has been on the Earth, but also relative to the experiences of the person and the emotions felt during those experiences. For example, being in love can alter perception of time and its value positively and negatively. When in love, a person will often view time spent with their lover as essential and never nearly enough. This skewed perception of time spent with a lover and the value placed on it can lead to a departure from the structure society demands of us. Inclinations to not do work can manifest themselves in the depreciating value of time spent doing work. Every day may take on the same nature previously felt only on weekends as extracurricular activities are dropped to increase the time spent with a lover. When reflecting back on high school many people observe that their four years have gone by quicker than any other period of time in their life. This is due to the changing emotional state of a person in high school. The instability of emotions peaks in high school and thoroughly distorts the perception of time in regards to speed.

Beginning in college and as a person matures, time begins to take on lesser proportions and society’s structure once again takes hold their use of time. While more superficial freedom is granted in college and in later adult life, the mind of the adult is impregnated with ideas of the future that will forever devalue their use of time. Generally, in college, a person will begin to concentrate on a studying a subject for a future. This emphasis on the future, unlike in the college application process, is a determinant for how someone will spend the rest of their life and most likely what field of work they will pursue. Society singlehandedly made the present subservient to the future. Despite all the different ways people spend their time in college and in their mid-twenties since their future career looms over their current actions they are subconsciously or consciously devaluing their present. The supposed best years of our live are quick to pass us, a process speeded up, not by rampantly changing emotions, but by society’s devaluation of time.

The shock from graduating college, in which we structure much of our own time, to an existence in which our work will probably demand more structure than ever before, grossly disturbs the way we view and value our time on Earth. Many people are easily preoccupied entirely with their work and the relatively short term goals of promotions and stable occupation. These societal ‘rites of passage’ for the working class can quickly absorb a person into a very narrow view of time and prevent them from using their time in the way they may wish they had later in life.

Unfortunately, it takes many people decades to realize how they could have better used their time in certain moments and how they wished they had viewed time. For the middle aged man/woman until death, time is viewed with death in mind. It becomes a precious commodity, but at the same time one that is slowly passing relative to the events occurring in their lives. Hopefully, at this point in their lives, they have wrestled with their own individuality and found a way to balance their use of time and society’s view of how it should be used, meaningfully.

Time should constantly be reevaluated and never left untouched in its abstract, original form. Requiring frequent struggles between an individual’s perception and use of time and society’s, a balance between society and the individual is being reached ever later in life. This is the cause of an increase in society’s structuring of time and the passivity of individuals who have superficial outlets through technology, but no real control of their time. To break this mold, individual’s must make time relevant to them, looking at the big picture (time until death) and focusing on their present as well as observing how their future, past and present relate. When these entities are in harmony a proper use and review of time may be achieved, contrary to the rigidness of society’s view of time.