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The Crisis of Meaning in Technological Modernity: A Critique of Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*

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Abstract We humans of the twenty-first century feel proud of our scientific and technological progress. Modern inventions now allow us to travel to places like Mars and the Moon, and scientists continue to explore whether life exists on these planets. We are also creating robots capable of performing all human tasks, with the hope that they will make our lives easier and more comfortable. However, we must stop and think—are these advancements truly improving our lives, or could they become a threat to our own existence and the survival of other species on Earth?

If we look at the world today, we may feel that humans have achieved remarkable development in every field. But despite this progress, people increasingly experience loneliness, isolation, and a lack of meaning in their lives. These feelings have grown stronger in the present generation. Humans often regarded as one of nature's finest creations because of our consciousness—that inner "spark of divinity" that connects us to something higher. Yet in our desire for control and material comfort, we have become restless. Excessive ambition has made us more selfish and troubled. In trying to dominate the world, we have made our own lives—and our planet—more fragile. We have lost our sense of right and wrong and, in the race for material success, forgotten the true purpose of our existence.

This paper examines the internal conflict within the human conscious self and its ongoing struggle with the external world. It seeks to help individuals understand the true purpose of life, recognize their existence in relation to other species, and inspire them to grow into better human beings with a deeper sense of responsibility toward themselves and society. It also explores the genuine meaning of human life, emphasizing the need to discover life within human beings and their social relationships rather than focusing on making robots or mechanical devices more "livable."

Humans today caught between two worlds—the **inner world** of feelings, values, and purpose, and the **outer world** of machines, competition, and material progress. Human ambition, when unguided by wisdom, can harm both the planet and us. By studying these issues, the paper reminds us that true growth does not come only from scientific achievements but also from emotional balance, moral values, and meaningful relationships.

Keywords: human meaning, alienation, technology, post-apocalyptic literature, Mary Shelley, *The Last Man*, logotherapy, anomie, philosophy of technology, AI society, loneliness

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Introduction: Progress Without Peace:

Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826) is one of the earliest works of post-apocalyptic pandemic fiction. It is frequently interpreted as a profound exploration of the crisis of human meaning in the face of near-extinction.

In the twenty-first century, human life appears modern and technologically advanced. We live surrounded by machines, smart devices, and scientific innovations that make daily tasks faster and more convenient. Space exploration, lunar and Martian studies, and human-like robots highlight the impressive progress of our species. Yet beneath this sense of achievement lies a growing unease. While technology has enriched the external aspects of our lives, it has simultaneously disturbed our inner world. Increasing numbers of people report loneliness, confusion, stress, and emotional disconnection.

People often celebrate the scientific and mechanical advances of our era. Powerful machines and groundbreaking research allow us to explore celestial bodies once thought unreachable. Robots capable of performing human activities promise convenience, safety, and efficiency. However, it is necessary to pause and reflect. Do these advancements truly improve the quality of human life? Or are they gradually becoming a threat—not only to humanity but to all living species on the planet?

Although humans have progressed in every direction, technology, medicine, communication, transportation, education, modern individuals face deep emotional and psychological struggles. Feelings of loneliness, lack of meaning, and isolation have become increasingly prominent. Even in a hyper-connected world, people often feel more alone than ever. This shows that technological growth does not automatically lead to emotional or spiritual growth.

Humans have considered one of nature's finest creations due to our consciousness—the ability to think, feel, reflect, and understand the deeper meaning of life. This "spark of divinity" sets us apart from other species. It gives us the ability to imagine, love, and distinguish right from wrong. But over time, human ambition has grown unchecked. The desire to rule, control nature, and gain power over everything around us has made us greedy for material pleasure. Instead of rising in wisdom and humanity, we have reduced ourselves to restless beings driven by desire rather than values.

This ambition has harmed the world around us. Pollution, environmental destruction, climate change, cruelty towards animals, and the loss of natural balance reveal the consequences of our choices. Humans have gradually lost their moral compass. In the race for material success, money, and fame, we have forgotten the true purpose of our existence. The separation between progress and purpose has created an inner conflict: the inner self—our conscience, emotions, and need for meaning—versus the external world of machines, technology, speed, and pressure. When we focus only on material achievements, we lose touch with our inner world. When we focus only inward, we feel lost in a society driven by productivity. This conflict makes life more challenging than ever.

The purpose of this reflection is to guide individuals toward a deeper and more conscious understanding of life's true meaning, which cannot be manufactured by machines or substituted by technological advancement. As we build sophisticated technologies and artificial intelligence systems, it becomes essential to question whether these creations genuinely enrich our lives or merely distract us from understanding who we truly are.

Meaning does not arise from creating more machines or teaching robots to imitate human behavior. These pursuits highlight intelligence, but they cannot replace fundamental existential questions: *Who are we? Why do we exist? What is our purpose?* Meaning is discovered through introspection, emotional awareness, and human relationships. Machines may replicate actions, but they cannot replicate consciousness, empathy, or moral responsibility.

Real progress measured not by advanced tools but by how deeply we cultivate human values. Strengthening relationships, nurturing emotional intelligence, and developing moral character are forms of progress no machine can achieve for us. When individuals live with compassion, awareness, and shared humanity, technology becomes a support rather than a distraction.

Reconnecting with our human qualities helps us see the world as a living system to which we belong. This perspective encourages environmental protection, respect for other species, and humility toward nature. Meaning is rooted in responsibility and care, not control. Balancing inner growth with external ambition opens the path to a future where technology enhances, rather than diminishes, our humanity.

This discussion becomes especially meaningful when we consider *The Last Man*. The novel imagines a world wiped out by a deadly pandemic and reflects the crisis of human meaning at the edge of extinction. It warns that technological progress cannot save us if we lose humanity. Shelley suggests that survival depends not solely on machines or science but on emotional strength, moral clarity, and human connection.

***The Last Man*: Plot Elements and Problem Setting:**

Shelley's novel is among the earliest post-apocalyptic pandemic narratives, blending personal grief and Romantic-era politics into a meditation on extinction, isolation, and ethical life. Recent scholarship frames it as a precursor to existential and dystopian political science fiction. Its depiction of global plague highlights how social fabric collapses when shared meaning disappears. Philosophers like Durkheim, Heidegger, Ellul, and Frankl echo the novel's themes by warning that modern society often multiplies means without clarifying ends.

In the end, it becomes clear that technology, no matter how advanced, cannot make human life truly complete. Machines assist us in countless ways, but they cannot provide meaning, inner peace, emotional fulfillment, or genuine human connection. Technology may enrich the external structure of our lives, but it cannot nourish our emotional and moral core.

Despite unprecedented technological progress, people today report feeling lonely, directionless, or disconnected. This emotional emptiness reveals a deeper problem—one that technological growth alone cannot solve. In our pursuit of success, comfort, and power, we have drifted away from our inner world. The pressure to achieve has overshadowed introspection, compassion, responsibility, and the desire to live a meaningful life.

The separation between external progress and internal fulfillment has created a subtle crisis. Technology accelerates tasks but cannot guide us toward wisdom. It connects us digitally but cannot replace the warmth of genuine relationships. It imitates human behavior but cannot replicate consciousness or empathy. These qualities emerge only when we nurture what makes us human.

Meaning cannot be bought, built, or programmed must be discovered. True fulfillment arises from compassion, relationships, kindness, and a sense of purpose. By valuing moral and emotional growth as much as technological achievement, we can restore balance in our lives.

Human life becomes meaningful not through the advancement of machines but through the advancement of our character. The true essence of being human is not measured by the number of inventions we produce, the speed at which we communicate, or the level of comfort technology offers us. Instead, meaning measured by the depth of our values, the strength of our relationships, and the clarity of our moral purpose. If we chase only success, power, and comfort, we risk creating a world overflowing with technological wonders yet empty of genuine human warmth. Such a world may impress the eye but fail to nourish the soul. History repeatedly shows that material progress, when detached from emotional intelligence and ethical responsibility, leaves individuals feeling disconnected, lonely, and spiritually unfulfilled.

When we focus exclusively on external achievement, better machines, faster systems, higher efficiency, we unintentionally weaken the internal pillars that give life its true meaning. Human beings are not designed to thrive on technology alone; we also need compassion, empathy, purpose, and belonging. Without these qualities, even the greatest innovations become hollow. A society that celebrates productivity over presence, speed over stillness, and competition over connection gradually distances itself from the essence of humanity. In such circumstances, people may achieve more than ever before yet feel more lost than ever within themselves.

Conclusion:

However, when we balance external achievement with inner growth, technology becomes a supportive tool rather than a substitute for human essence. Machines can help us live more comfortably, but they cannot teach us how to live wisely. They can perform tasks with precision, but they cannot replace the emotional richness of human relationships or the quiet strength that comes from self-reflection. When individuals nurture qualities such as kindness, patience, honesty, and resilience, they create a life that technology can enhance but never overshadow. By cultivating our inner world, we ensure that progress does not come at the cost of humanity. True completeness, therefore, lies not in what we create with our hands, but in what we nurture within ourselves. A meaningful life grows from the seeds of responsibility, integrity, and compassion—values that no machine can replicate. As we deepen our understanding of who we are and what truly matters, we build an inner foundation that remains steady even as the world around us changes

rapidly. The more we cultivate our emotional and moral character, the more capable we become of using technology wisely, ethically, and harmoniously.

In the end, the question is not how advanced our machines become, but how advanced we become as human beings. When inner growth and outer progress move hand in hand, we create a world where innovation coexists with empathy, where achievement is balanced by purpose, and where technology enriches life without replacing its essence. Only then can humanity experience true progress that elevates not only our abilities but also our hearts, minds, and spirits.

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