

# What is the meaning of life?

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*This is an edited transcript of a lecture given at the LSE in March 2023. The lecture introduces the “meaning of life” question via Tolstoy’s Confession, then considers the strengths and limitations of religious and secular answers to the question.*

## **Tolstoy’s question**

Our question is: *what is the meaning of life?* A question people who’ve never studied philosophy often take as their caricature of the discipline. It’s not what our discipline is really all about, but I think it is an important question nonetheless. Part of the challenge is to understand what the question is. This is part of the joke, I think: people think philosophers spend all their time talking about the meaning of life, and not one of them knows what they’re talking about. But although it is an elusive question, I do think it is a good one.

No one introduces the question better than Leo Tolstoy in his singular book *Confession*. The book is an introspective, first-person account of a personal crisis: an autobiography of the mind. From the outside, Tolstoy seemed to be having an enviable life. He was a Russian aristocrat living in a large country house, Yasnaya Polyana, with a big family. He was an incredibly successful novelist, the author of *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, two of the greatest novels ever written, acclaimed in his own lifetime. But he’d also witnessed great suffering. He’d fought in the Crimean war. He had thirteen children, but four died in infancy. He’d watched several of his children die, and his brother died of tuberculosis, suffering appallingly. He was well aware, too, that it is not just human lives that are blighted by suffering. The wider natural world is full of suffering too. The diets that sustain human beings rest atop a mountain of animal pain. That was true in Tolstoy’s day as well as our own, and it concerned him. There are many things we can do to mitigate animal suffering, but it’s doubtful there is anything we can do to end it completely, short of eradicating animals.

Tolstoy started to reflect, too, on his own mortality. He describes in *Confession* how he was gripped by the realization that he too would one day reach the same terminus as his brother and his four dead children. Eventually, his body would fail him. His experiences would cease, and everything he left behind him would also end. Many of us hope for a legacy that outlives us. But Tolstoy started to find this a dissatisfying thought. The nine children who survived infancy

would also ultimately die. *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* may still be read in a hundred years. But he thought to himself: what is a hundred years in the context of the universe? All this will at some point be forgotten.

Moreover, the human species as a whole will end. There will at some point, be a last generation. When I was younger, there was a “Big Crunch” hypothesis according to which the universe would eventually move into a sort of reverse Big Bang. This is no longer popular among physicists, as I understand it. More popular now is the idea of heat death. The universe will continue expanding forever, and eventually there will come a point at which energy is so dispersed that the conditions no longer exist for supporting stars or life. The universe will become an utterly lifeless place for unfathomable lengths of time. So, even if you think humans will find a way of somehow escaping the destruction of our own star, eventually the entire universe will run out of steam. It is not just that individual humans are mortal: the human species is also mortal. We will, collectively, have an end in time.

Tolstoy found there was no escape from these three facts: you will die, any legacy you leave will eventually be erased, and the world around you is full of suffering, even if your own life is not. And a question gripped him: *what is the value of a human life under those conditions?* What answer can be given to the doubts about the value of our lives—and of human life in general—that naturally arise, for many of us, when we reflect on our own mortality, the impermanence of all achievements, and the amount of suffering the world contains? This was the question Tolstoy called the “meaning of life” question.

It is a question that expresses a certain kind of sceptical doubt. There is a resemblance to epistemological scepticism, scepticism about knowledge. The radical epistemological sceptic argues: your contact with the world is entirely mediated by the senses. Your senses can deceive you. It’s easy to imagine how they might radically deceive you. These are the inescapable facts about our predicament. Given those inescapable facts, how can knowledge still be possible? We are considering a parallel line of thought in the ethical domain. A line of thought that takes three inescapable facts about the human condition and asks how anything of real value can still be attainable in light of those facts.

Tolstoy was not the first to ask these questions. He was undoubtedly influenced by Indian philosophy (as well as by Schopenhauer, who was himself influenced by Indian thought). The question of how to live in the light of mortality, impermanence and suffering is the central question of Buddhism, though in that context the question is not usually posed as one about life’s “meaning”, worth or value. It’s in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that a clear-eyed Buddhist picture of the transient and suffering-filled nature of human life collides with a European fixation on appraising the worth or value of one’s achievements. The “meaning of life” problem arises from the difficulty of reconciling these outlooks.

In *Confession*, Tolstoy describes how his battle with the question of life’s meaning led him to dark places. It can be a difficult question to think about dispassionately. But let’s try to do so. It is a question one *has* to think about, I think. The confrontation cannot be postponed indefinitely.

The question is sometimes dismissed as badly formed, as nonsense. I don't think that's the right response at all. To the extent that many responded in that way in 20<sup>th</sup> century analytic philosophy, so much the worse for 20<sup>th</sup> century analytic philosophy. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, more philosophers broadly in the 'analytic' tradition have been seeing the importance of the question.

### **Religion as a source of answers?**

Where might we look for answers? I think it's one of the great attractions of religion that, at least on the face of it, it *seems* to offer answers to Tolstoy's question.

As Tolstoy himself describes brilliantly in *Confession*, doubts about the value of human lives often start to creep into our minds when religious answers drilled into us as children lose their grip. Tolstoy tells of how he was raised in the Russian Orthodox Church and uncritically accepted the church's answers. But as he pursued a career as an author, those answers began to seem less and less credible, until eventually he found himself in circles where people would openly ridicule them.

The thought struck him, as it strikes many of us: I've internalized answers in childhood, and I now find them drained of all credibility. So, what are *my* answers? What *does* make human life valuable? I can relate to this. Like many people in Britain, I went to a religious school—a Church of England primary school—in which certain kinds of answers to Tolstoy's questions were repeated to us every day. That experience of finding the drilled answers to be bleeding credibility, year by year, is a familiar one.

Some have argued that when doubts about life's meaning do assail us, the only answer is to turn back towards religion. Some say: secular answers to these questions do not exist. Tolstoy's path, as, as recounted in *Confession*, is one that ultimately brings him back. Not back to Russian Orthodoxy—far from it—but back to a certain kind of heterodox Christian faith (as outlined in his *Gospel in Brief*).

A similar answer is given by William James. In an essay called "Is Life Worth Living?", James, like Tolstoy, loops around to the idea that secular answers to these questions are inadequate. James argues that, given the insufficiency of secular answers, we have a right to believe there's more to the universe than what is apparent in the picture given to us by the sciences:

we have a right to believe the physical order to be only a partial order; that we have a right to supplement it by an unseen spiritual order which we assume on trust, if only thereby life may seem to us better worth living again. (James 1895)

What is this "unseen spiritual order"? Presumably, an afterlife: an extra part to the universe in which eternal achievements are in fact possible, and in which the usual platitudes about impermanence and death no longer apply. In Indian religions a different type of spiritual order is posited—*samsāra*, the cycle of rebirth—but I think James is thinking mainly of Abrahamic religions, especially Christianity.

Does this answer the sceptical doubt? Thomas Nagel's paper on "The Absurd" contains (almost in passing) a brief argument that could be read as a counterargument to Tolstoy and James. Nagel writes:

A role in some larger enterprise cannot confer significance unless that enterprise is itself significant. And its significance must come back to what we can understand, or it will not even appear to give us what we are seeking. If we learned that we were being raised to provide food for other creatures fond of human flesh, who planned to turn us into cutlets before we got too stringy—even if we learned that the human race had been developed by animal breeders precisely for this purpose—that would still not give our lives meaning, for two reasons. First, we would still be in the dark as to the significance of the lives of those other beings; second, although we might acknowledge that this culinary role would make our lives meaningful to them, it is not clear how it would make them meaningful to us. (Nagel 1971, p. 721)

The example reminds me of the Kazuo Ishiguro novel *Never Let Me Go*. The story follows a group of clones. It transpires that people are producing human clones as sources of organs. The clones are harvested when they reach maturity, like crops or farm animals. So, the clones have a "higher purpose": a purpose in the eyes of other, more powerful beings. There's something they're there *for*. They are there to generate organs for everybody else.

Nagel is surely right to say: *that's* not what we're asking for when doubts assail us about the meaning of life. The doubts are not put to rest by just *any* higher purpose, even a higher purpose we don't understand or don't agree with. Indeed, some higher purposes, like being raised to produce organs, can generate the opposite of meaning, a sort of "anti-meaning" (Campbell and Nyholm 2015). If one learns that one simply exists to produce organs for someone else, doubts about the value of one's life, far from being assuaged, become even worse.

So, not just any higher purpose will do. Nagel's remarks suggest two further conditions. First, the higher purpose must be *intelligible* to us. Second, it must be one that we *endorse*. Ishiguro's clones do have an intelligible higher purpose, at least once they find out about it. They can *make sense* of their own existence well enough. But the higher purpose they uncover is not one they *endorse*; it's one they profoundly reject.

How does this point carry over to the case of religion? On many religious outlooks, the higher purpose our lives are supposed to serve is unintelligible to us. We *talk* about eternal life, the afterlife, infinity, heaven, and so on. But I am not sure these ideas are intelligible enough to allow understanding of why our individual lives are a valuable part of God's plan. There often comes a point where religions tell us to stop asking questions. We are told to accept the Lord moves in mysterious ways; the great plan is inscrutable. But religions, when they say things like this, are not really delivering the intelligible answers they initially seemed to promise.

But remember there is also the matter of whether we would *endorse* the higher purpose if we understood it. Is there *any* higher purpose human life could be serving such that, if you knew it, you would endorse it, knowing the vast amount of suffering it evidently involves?

Ivan Karamazov, in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, expresses a sceptical view on this question. He is uneasy about there being any possible bigger picture in which human suffering can be seen to make sense, or seen to be somehow outweighed or justified on balance by some greater good. Ivan relates stories from the newspapers of his time: stories of war crimes, stories of child abuse. He reports cases of soldiers bayonetting children in front of their mothers, a story about an infant being left in an attic to starve by its parents, crying and "beating its breast with its fist". Ivan's point is: there is no bigger picture that could justify this. There is no bigger picture such that if you understood it, you'd think, "Oh yes, I see now why that had to happen. I see now why all of those children had to suffer." Ivan poses a question to his devout brother, Alyosha:

Imagine that you are creating a fabric of human destiny with the object of making men happy in the end, giving them peace and rest at last, but that it was essential and inevitable to torture to death only one tiny creature—that baby beating its breast with its fist, for instance—and to found that edifice on its unavenged tears, would you consent to be the architect on those conditions? (Dostoevsky 1880/2004, book 5, chapter 4)

Alyosha answers that he would not. And it's no way out to say: yes, there's no bigger picture that we can comprehend, but maybe there is a picture beyond our understanding. Ivan's thesis is: *any* such picture would be an immoral one, irrespective of the details, because it would inevitably be one in which the suffering inflicted on infants was claimed to be somehow "worth it" in light of something else, and *any* such picture would be immoral.

I find this a powerful consideration. For me, it weighs more heavily than the point about intelligibility. I don't see a path to answering Tolstoy's question that runs via the idea of an unseen spiritual order that could show all the suffering in the world to be in service of a higher purpose, because any such higher purpose would—like harvesting clones for their organs—be one that involves tolerating appalling suffering for the supposedly greater good.

### **Arcs of history**

Religious answers remain the most popular answers. The majority of humans believe in some kind of unseen spiritual order. But I struggle with this, and so I ask myself: what non-religious answers are also out there?

James considers non-religious answers as well. He considers a line of thought that goes: yes, the world is indeed full of suffering and injustice. And yes, these things do call the value of our lives into question. But one source of value in one's life is the *fight* against these very things. The

sense of indignation we feel at the amount of suffering and injustice the world contains can sustain our emotional engagement with life, and the struggle can make life valuable and worth living. A fight against suffering and injustice can allow us to find value in what we're doing. Moreover, we can conceive of ourselves as just one small part of a *great fight*, a collective effort persisting across the generations.

James calls this an “instinctive antidote to pessimism”. There is something in this. It reminds me, in particular, of that famous line from Martin Luther King, regularly quoted by Barack Obama. At the rally in Selma, one of the most famous rallies of the American Civil Rights Movement, King told the crowd that “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.” In essence: your lives are absolutely full of injustice and you are furious about it, but harness that fury, because in the long term we will achieve justice given enough time, given enough generations.

This is an important idea for many religious believers, including King himself, but the core idea can be motivating for the non-religious as well. Against the backdrop of mortality, impermanence, suffering, one of the things that can give value to our lives is joining the great fight against injustice and suffering.

Kieran Setiya, in *Life is Hard*, has defended this idea in a secular form. He introduces the idea that the question of whether life has meaning depends on the overall shape of the story of humanity. This idea of “the shape of the story of humanity” is an intriguing one. Setiya argues that there ways human history could play out, overall, that really would have dire implications for the meaning of the individual human lives in that story.

Suppose the scenario depicted in the P.D. James novel (and Alfonso Cuarón film) *The Children of Men* actually happens in the near future. Rather like *Never Let Me Go*, this is another dystopian vision of the future of Britain. In the novel, the entire human species becomes infertile. Everyone's lives continue, but no one can produce any children. So, everyone knows a clock is ticking down towards human extinction. You can have a fun life, but the human species is not going to outlive you by very long. We have a few decades left, then we're done. Samuel Scheffler has explored this type of scenario extensively in his book *Death and the Afterlife*.

Setiya argues: such an abrupt ending would give a truly terrible narrative shape to the story of humanity. Everything would curtailed at such an... unfinished point. It felt like we were just getting started. We evolved intelligence, spread around the planet, developed agriculture, industrialized, fought terrible wars, went to the Moon, developed computer technology and the internet... and then all died. The Moon thing was probably the high point. Setiya argues: if *that's* to be the overall the story of humanity, then individual human lives probably don't have a lot of meaning or value, because the story is such a tragic one. Our potential was largely unfulfilled. We created terrible problems, like climate change and extreme inequality, but never got round to solving them.

Luckily, this is only a thought experiment: it's quite reasonable to hope that the human species will not be extinct in a few decades' time. In fact, some of the futures we can hope for

would give the story of humanity a much more favourable shape. We can hope, in particular, that our story will have a redemptive arc. Rather than being a story of terrible world wars, climate change, injustice, inequality, and then extinction, we can hope it will be one in which we collectively find ways to address the problems we've created.

We can hope to collectively find a way to achieve nuclear disarmament, for example. We can hope to find a solution to the problems of climate change. We can hope to find a way to coexist in a world where we're sustainably using the world's resources rather than just burning it all off as quickly as possible. We can hope to find a solution to at least the human-caused problems of animal suffering, so rather than bringing up animals in terrible conditions so we can eat them, we find new ways of feeding ourselves. We can hope to find solutions to problems of injustice, so rather than living in grotesquely unequal societies with vast differences of wealth, we find ways to live more harmoniously so that opportunity is more equally shared. And then we have a very long period of existence characterized by relative peace and harmony.

And *then* we go extinct. It's part of the arc that extinction does eventually happen. Something does get us in the end. We don't live forever. But Setiya's point is that this redemptive arc to the human story, even though it still ends with extinction, gives much more value to the lives in it than an arc in which we're wiped out right now, our potential tragically unfulfilled. In the redemptive arc, your individual life really can have meaning and value, if you contribute to humanity's eventual redemption.

There are certainly strong echoes of religion in all this. Echoes in particular of the Christian narrative of redemption. Setiya is suggesting there can be a secular version of that traditional narrative, a version that can be achieved without any supernatural involvement, simply through the eventual creation of a more peaceful and just social order here on Earth, something a little like the Kantian vision of a "kingdom of ends". And his proposal is that believing in the possibility of that kind of future can be a source of meaning in one's life, just as much as believing in an unseen spiritual order—but better, because it's more intelligible.

But imagine here the voice of the pessimist, the voice of our sceptic. The idea of a redemptive arc, they say, is just utopianism. How likely is it really that the arc of the moral universe bends towards justice? Would it not be more accurate to say that the arc of the actual universe bends towards extinction—and that there is no further "moral universe" beyond the actual universe? Moreover, when we look at the world around us, do we see any evidence that cumulative moral progress is building towards a situation in which justice and the absence of suffering have been achieved? Or do we, perhaps, see lots of signs around us that humans may be heading rather rapidly towards a demise brought about by their own actions?

These thoughts might lead us to doubt whether the arc of the moral universe bending towards justice is one that can be fully secularised, fully severed from the idea of an unseen spiritual order. Perhaps this is why James considered "instinctive antidotes to pessimism" such as rage against injustice to be a "halfway stage", a step in the right direction but inevitably less than fully adequate. For someone broadly optimistic about the future of humanity, the hope of creating a

redemptive arc comes easily, but such a person is not feeling the force of Tolstoy's question very strongly to begin with. For someone inclined towards pessimism, meanwhile, the idea that the arc of humanity could be bent towards justice seems too implausible to sustain hope. The only stable stopping point, James thought, was to return to religion.

### **Lowering the stakes**

A different type of response can be found in Iddo Landau's *Finding Meaning in an Imperfect World*. Setiya acknowledges the terms of the debate as set by Tolstoy, James, etc., but argues that the question can be given a secular answer. There is a vision of a secular future we can believe in that can answer our doubts about life's meaning. Landau, by contrast, wants to challenge the motivation for these doubts.

The "meaning of life" problem, as we've seen, arises from the way facts about mortality, impermanence, and suffering seem to cast doubt on the value of our lives. I said earlier that these doubts "naturally arise for many of us", but *should* they? What is the argument that connects the various descriptive premises to the evaluative conclusion? We can try to reconstruct that argument and think about its presuppositions.

Landau's claim is such arguments always rest on dubious presuppositions about value. He calls them "perfectionist presuppositions." He thinks that, to run arguments going from mortality, impermanence and suffering to meaninglessness, we must set high standards for a valuable achievement—standards that imply the great difficulty of achieving anything of true value and the worthlessness of imperfect attempts. These presuppositions, once exposed to the light, no longer seem so plausible, and they can and should be challenged.

Let's think about some of these arguments, starting with impermanence: Tolstoy was clearly troubled by the thought that no human life results in a *truly lasting* achievement. Everything we think we've achieved is eventually annihilated. To arrive at an evaluative conclusion, his other premise must be that a human life has value only if it results in a truly lasting achievement.

Landau asks us to think about the standards that are being used to decide what counts as *truly lasting* here. A certain kind of presupposition has entered our thinking when we set such a high bar for what it is for an achievement to be *truly lasting* that human extinction precludes it no matter how far in the future it may occur. A hundred years is not enough, a thousand years is not enough. If my legacy fails to endure *forever*, it has no value. Landau sees this as an example of the kind of presupposition we should challenge. It is presupposing that transient achievements have no value. Why think this is true?

Consider an analogy: it doesn't bother me at all to think that my achievements are localized in space. Anything I achieve, I achieve on one planet in a vast cosmos. So, spatially, my achievements are very, very localized. But I don't find this to be a source of doubt about the value of those achievements. But to say that my achievements will eventually be annihilated is



just to say that they are localized in time. Why do we treat localization in time so differently from localization in space? There is no obvious justification for the double-standard.

With this line of response in mind, consider the pessimistic line of thought on suffering. The argument is: no human life makes anything more than a negligible difference to the amount of suffering in the universe. You're born into a world that's full of suffering. You leave a world that's still full of suffering, having made no more than a negligible difference at the margins. To arrive at an evaluative conclusion, we also need the premise that a human life has value only if it significantly reduces the amount of suffering in the universe.

Landau says: here too, there is a presupposition in the background. Think about the standards that are being used to adjudicate *negligible* and *significant*. Another high bar is being tacitly introduced. What it would be to have a significant effect? For pessimists, it is apparently not enough to help a single sentient being—your pet mouse, for example—in some minor way, such as by giving it antibiotics for an infection. You have to do some *big* thing, significant in the context of the universe. But why think this is true? A non-perfectionist alternative is available on which we accept *any* net reduction in the amount of suffering in the universe as giving value to a life. On this view, if you live in such a way that, because of your life, the total amount of suffering in the universe is just a tiny, tiny bit less than if you'd never lived, you have lived a valuable life.

A pessimist may fire back that even a tiny net reduction in suffering is very, very hard to achieve. I feel the force of this. I suspect most human lives have a suffering balance in the red: a typical human life causes more suffering than it prevents. It's hard to escape this conclusion when one considers the way our food is produced. Many animals suffer to enable us to live the lives that we currently live. People sometimes ask me: why are you vegetarian?—and I think this is the real answer. I want to give myself a *chance* of getting my suffering ledger into the black. But I say “a chance”, because, even for someone who doesn't eat meat, it's easy to live a life that has a net positive effect on the amount of suffering in the universe. I still go through life supporting many companies, institutions and governments that do dreadful things, and have long given up on the idea of trying to extract myself from the web of complicity in which we are all ensnared.

The flipside is that, if we *can* achieve a net lifetime reduction by dedicating ourselves to collective projects that reduce the amount of suffering in the world, we should not beat ourselves up about whether that positive effect was negligible or significant in the context of the universe. Just to leave the world with less suffering in it, to even the tiniest degree, is already a hard, difficult achievement, something we should take pride in.

I think Landau is on to something: when we think about Schopenhauer and Tolstoy, and pessimistic writers more generally, there is a certain kind of pattern, a characteristic path to sceptical doubt. The path involves holding on to high standards for what it takes to achieve something of worth or value, while throwing out the religious worldviews that make those presuppositions seem plausible. After all, if you do believe in an unseen spiritual order, you are

likely to also believe in a process through which transient achievements are converted into eternal (or, in Indian religions, karmic) consequences. If that's what you believe, then the stakes really are high in life. Your choices really are momentous. The problem of the "meaning of life" arises when you hold on to the high-stakes view of life while jettisoning the belief in a spiritual order that could make it true.

As I see it, there are two ways to turn off the path to sceptical doubt about life's value. There is the way James and Tolstoy advocate, which is to turn back to religion, and to the idea of an unseen spiritual order that upholds the idea that life's stakes are indeed high. The second way—the way Landau advocates—is to find value in transient, localized, small-scale achievements. Yes, you might only be making a negligible difference to the world. You might be just helping one person that you care for over months or years. You might just be easing the suffering of a single animal. The achievements might be very small, very localized; they might even be achievements no one else knows about. But despite the relatively low stakes, our lives are made valuable by the many small, localized, transient micro-achievements they contain.

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