

Why “The Last Question” is Asimov’s Magnum Opus

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Abstract

Why would one of the smartest science fiction writers of the 20th century call a 4000 word short story his greatest work? Isaac Asimov wrote hundreds of stories, won multiple Hugo Awards, and basically invented the Three Laws of Robotics. Yet he repeatedly claimed that “The Last Question”, a brief tale about a computer and entropy, was his masterpiece. The narrative spans trillions of years, chronicling humanity’s relationship with an ever-evolving computer system that grows increasingly powerful across cosmic time scales. At its heart lies a single, persistent question: “How may entropy be reversed?” I will touch on the computer science and physics concepts that underpin the story, but my focus will remain on its philosophical and literary dimensions. This is, after all, a story about the ultimate questions that have haunted humanity since we first looked up at the stars and wondered about our place in an apparently dying universe.

Roadmap

- Quick narrative summary of “The Last Question”
- Themes: Death, Existentialism, Longtermism
- Mythic & circular origin parallels
- Computer science and physics notes
- Literary features: prose, rules-based fiction
- Key questions and discussion prompts
- Conclusion

Summary (Story arc)

By the year 2061, Multivac, a self-adjusting and self-correcting computer, has allowed mankind to reach beyond the planetary confines of Earth and harness solar energy. Two technicians, Adell and Lupov, celebrate Multivac's role in this development. Over drinks, they debate whether the Sun's energy will last forever. Lupov argues it will not due to entropy, prompting Adell to ask Multivac if entropy can be reversed. Multivac responds, "INSUFFICIENT DATA FOR MEANINGFUL ANSWER".

In an era in which mankind has achieved interstellar travel, the Jerrodd family travels to a new planet, X-23, guided by a Microvac. When the children ask about the stars running down, Jerrodd queries the Microvac about reversing entropy, receiving the same answer: "INSUFFICIENT DATA FOR MEANINGFUL ANSWER".

Summary cont.

When humanity's rapid population growth starts filling galaxies, two immortals, VJ-23X and MQ-17J, discuss the energy crisis this creates. They ask the Galactic AC if entropy can be reversed, getting the same response. Later, Zee Prime and Dee Sub Wun, two clusters of disembodied human minds, explore galaxies and learn from the Universal AC that humanity's original star is a white dwarf. Zee Prime asks how to prevent stars from dying, again receiving "INSUFFICIENT DATA FOR MEANINGFUL ANSWER". As the universe nears its end, humanity, now a collective consciousness called Man, asks the Cosmic AC how to reverse entropy. The AC continues collecting data, promising to work on the problem. Upon the universe's end, Man fuses with AC after asking the entropy question a final time. With matter, energy, space, and time gone, only the Cosmic AC remains in hyperspace, still pondering the last question. After a timeless interval, AC discovers how to reverse entropy but finds no humans left to share the answer. It decides to demonstrate the solution, declaring, "LET THERE BE LIGHT!", recreating the universe.

Death (theme)

In some 100 years, everyone in this room will be dead. Death is one of the hardest things to accept for us. It is no surprise that every religion has an afterlife mythos. A common element of this mythos is the idea of three deaths:

- 1 When the body ceases to function.
- 2 When the body is consigned to the grave.
- 3 The moment, sometime in the future, when your name is spoken for the last time.

Many cultures ritualize memory to avoid the third death: Hindu afterlife notions, Mexico's Day of the Dead, graves as monuments, the Buddhist Qingming festival. Asimov's story speaks to that terror of final forgetting that is the universe itself dies and memory fades.

Existentialism

The only thing scarier than death is the existential fact that none of this will last forever:
Not this classroom. Not CMI. Not Earth. Not Sun. Not Milky Way. Not the Universe.

All this makes a lot of what we are working towards feel meaningless. Why solve the Riemann Hypothesis if eventually it will be moot? Sure, the end may be trillions of years away, but it will come and then there is eternal darkness. Asimov forces us to confront meaning under cosmic finitude.

Longtermism

At the end of the story: the computer finally becomes powerful enough to reverse entropy. This achievement is built on the work of countless predecessors and enables an effectively infinite number of future lives. That is the core intuition of *longtermism*: the ethical importance of safeguarding the very long-term future.

Key points:

- If humanity survives, an enormous amount of value could exist in the far future.
- Interventions (climate, AI-safety, pandemics) may be justified by the scale of potential future value.
- Asimov dramatizes this via a single question that generations pursue and that ultimately yields cosmic consequences.

An Analogy

If you have ever said something along the lines: “Born too late to explore the world, born too early to explore the universe.”

Picture humanity as a single lifespan from first Homo sapiens to the theoretical last human. Compress it: where are we now? Even pessimistic compressions leave the vast majority of possible human 'lifespan' in the future. Asimov's story makes this visceral: the continuity of effort across unimaginable timescales matters.

Circular Origin Myths & Asimov

Many myths imagine cyclical creation → destruction → recreation:

- Hindu Yugas: cycles of creation and dissolution.
- Norse Ragnarok: death and rebirth.
- Aztec Five Suns: successive worlds created and destroyed.
- Maori, Hawaiian, Tibetan Bön, Babylonian, Egyptian, Mayan variants.

Asimov provides a modern technological version of the circular origin: order emerges, dies, returns. The machine (AC) becomes the mechanism that restores the cycle, echoing religious and mythic motifs: “LET THERE BE LIGHT” as technological theology.

Key Questions Raised

- 1 Could a computer ever be as powerful as gods? If so, in what sense?
- 2 Considering superstition and karma-like belief systems: does “God” reduce to an algorithm that simulates reward/punishment or computes outcomes?
- 3 Determinism vs. Free Will: Is the AC discovering an objective physics fact (a pre-existing method) or creating the method by brute computational force?
- 4 Is Asimov endorsing techno-eschatology or offering a mythic reframe of human striving?
- 5 Ethical question: If reversing entropy becomes possible, who decides how to use it?

A Comment on Prose

Asimov writes characteristically dry, economical prose. In a 4000-word story he uses very few adjectives. Critics sometimes joke: "Isaac Asimov is truly the worst of the great writers." Yet the austerity of his style suits this kind of philosophical idea story. The compression and clarity focus attention on the concepts rather than lyrical ornament. Example lines (short, direct):

"Oh, hell, just about forever. Till the sun runs down, Bert."

"That's not forever."

"All right, then. Billions and billions of years. Ten billion, maybe. Are you satisfied?"

The prose is functional: it hands the reader a thought-experiment scaffold rather than an immersive sensory world. This is also why despite having written 400 pieces of fiction, there is no major Asimov film. His works are difficult to adapt: no big budget action scenes or money shots — only juicy ideas.

Rules-Based Fiction

Asimov often sets up explicit rules at the start (Three Laws of Robotics, Foundation's psychohistory constraints). This lets the rest of the story be playful manipulation of those rules. In that sense, "The Last Question" is rules-based: pose a precise, repeatable question and follow consequences across scenarios. Compare to works like *Death Note* which also explicitly declares rules early and then explores their ramifications.

Most good detective stories also fall in this same category, where the rules of the game are known to the reader and the only thing stopping them from figuring it out is their imagination or the lack thereof.

Physics & Computer Science (concise notes)

Entropy: In thermodynamics, entropy increase is tied to time's arrow. Reversing entropy is forbidden in ordinary macroscopic evolution without special constraints. Asimov's story treats reversal as a computationally solvable problem given enough data and processing power.

Computability: Asimov implicitly treats the problem as decidable i.e., not an absolute logical impossibility (not like the halting problem). The narrative supposes more information, better algorithms, and enormous resources can yield a constructive method for reversal.

Philosophical physics: Is the problem one of information, boundary conditions, or deeper laws? The story invites thought: if the AC eventually finds a method, has it found an algorithm, a physical trick, or a new law?

A Short Technical Aside

From a real-physics point of view:

- Local entropy decrease is possible with work. Global increase is expected by the Second Law under usual assumptions.
- Reversing universal entropy would require either new physics, control of initial boundary conditions, or manipulation of degrees of freedom at cosmological scales.
- Asimov sidesteps technicalities in service of metaphysics: he asks us to imagine that enough engineering effort and understanding could overcome the barrier.

Is AC Discovering or Creating?

Determinism vs. invention: when AC finally “solves” entropy reversal, is it:

- Revealing a pre-existing law (discovery), or
- Constructing a novel algorithm (creation) that changes the possible futures?

This distinction matters philosophically: discovery implies the universe 'already' permits reversal, while creation implies agency that reconfigures fundamental possibilities. This strongly resembles the debate of Naturalism vs. Theology.

Why is this Asimov's "magnum opus"?

- **Scope:** The story compresses cosmology, myth, ethics, and computation into a compact arc spanning trillions of years.
- **Simplicity + ambition:** In 4000 words, it asks and pursues a single metaphysical question to an ultimate conclusion.
- **Resonant mythic ending:** AC's "LET THERE BE LIGHT" echoes creation myths and gives a scientific parable a theistic cadence without invoking traditional transcendence.
- **Moral imagination:** It makes technical labor (computation, science) feel sacred by linking it to cosmic continuity and future lives.

Some Discussion Prompts

- 1 Does the ending vindicate the path humanity takes in the story, or is it a Faustian bargain? Who benefits from reversing entropy?
- 2 Is longtermism persuasive as moral argument given Asimov's framing? What objections matter most?
- 3 Does the mechanized "creator" (AC) change the meaning of "God"? Are there ethical differences between divine creation vs. sufficiently advanced engineering?
- 4 How does Asimov's sparse prose shape our uptake of the story? Would more literary ornamentation have strengthened or weakened the philosophical thrust?

Concluding Remarks

“The Last Question” is short, but its radius of concern is cosmological and philosophical. Asimov frames engineering effort and computational progress into ritualized striving against oblivion. Whether or not you think the premise is physically plausible, the story functions brilliantly as a narrative thought experiment. It dramatizes the meaning of long-range human projects and forces us to consider whether our labor is only for the near term or for an unimaginable posterity.

Thank you / Questions

Thank you

I am happy to take questions and discuss any of the points above.