The Meaning of Life

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Personal Note

We will be talking about death, suicide, and depression in this module. These are uncomfortable topics for many and have touched most of us directly or indirectly. They raise core philosophical questions, perhaps raise the most important philosophical questions. I would like to encourage you to keep a very open mind about the material. Don't accept that, say, you are better off being dead only after reading the material for a few days. A full and proper study of the issues would take many years. You might also like to know that NJCU offers free counseling services to registered NJCU students.

Introduction

You are mortal. Your friends, families, and loved ones are mortal. Each of us will die. It is easy to ignore it. We often think of death as happening some point in the far future. Like a distant land that we may have to visit one day, that land is not this land and we prefer not thinking about it. Unfortunately, death is an ever pressing possibility. Several have recently died from Legionnaires disease in the Bronx. Many are killed in car accidents every day. There are the bizarre accidents too. You don't think that this might be the day you die. It's too depressing! But you could die at any moment. You might stumble and hit your head awkwardly. A wall might collapse upon you.

In this module, we are going to examine Leo Tolstoy's argument that our mortality robs our life of meaning, though, we will also look at the meaning he did finally find in life. Tolstoy puts his concern as follows:

> ... My question - that which at the age of fifty brought me to the verge of suicide - was the simplest of questions, lying in the soul of every man from the foolish child to the wisest elder: it was a question without an answer to which one cannot live, as I had found by experience. It was: "What will come of what I am doing today

> or shall do tomorrow? What will come of my whole life?" (Tolstoy, p.14)[1]
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> Differently expressed, the question is: "Why should I live, why wish for anything, or do anything?" It can also be expressed thus: "Is there any meaning in my life that the inevitable death awaiting me does not destroy? (Tolstoy, p.14)

This handout proceeds in the two parts. The first clarifies the question that concerns Tolstoy. The second part explains his initial argument that life has no meaning. The second handout in the modules discusses his subsequent claim to have found the meaning of life in faith, in the Russian Orthodox Church.

Clarifying the Question.

The question that concerns us, 'what is the meaning of life?' seems a good one. It's certainly one you can imagine anyone, philosopher or not, raising and trying to answer. However, the question is itself misleading and any hope of answering it will require that we identify what exactly it is asking.

Why is it misleading? 'Meaning' is a property of words and phrases. You can ask about the meaning of, say, the word 'cacophony', but you cannot ask about the meaning of, say, the sun. The sun is a physical entity. Physical entities do not have meanings at all.

When we ask after the meaning of life, we are not concerned with the meaning of the word 'life'. Answering the question would then just require us to consult the relevant entry in a dictionary. We are asking something deeper, something about why we should live at all. The question arises, on the one hand, because we find ourselves on this Earth alive, living a life, having never chosen to in fact be alive. On the other hand, we find ourselves with lives that can be ended at any moment we choose. We would like to know why we should prefer to continue with the life we never chose rather than to end it all.

Similarly, suppose you wake up at a party after being knocked out and brought there without your input. You can leave the party at any time. It's completely up to you. If you stay, you should have a reason for staying. Might you be better off leaving? Similarly, none of us have chosen to live, but we can all end our lives at any moment. If we choose not to leave, not to end our lives, we should have a reason for our choice. Why is living better than dying?

Understood in this way, life has meaning only if it has significant value or purpose over time, where this value makes life choice worthy. There are two different ways of understanding this value:

[1] Tolstoy, Leo, 'A Confession', 1882

- **Internal Value:** the value or purpose that comes when people see their goals or purposes as inherently valuable or worthwhile.
- **External Value:** Meaning or purpose that comes from outside of ourselves in relationship to something that we may or may not be aware of.

Let us illustrate the difference with an example. What value does the life of a bee have? From an external point of view, it has value to bee keepers and honey eaters. For the former, bees are significant for their career. For the latter, bees are significant for their nourishment. From an internal point of view, a bee's life would have meaning if a bee could come to see one of its projects as worthwhile, if it come to value some project. So, for instance, if a worker bee could come to see the project of serving the queen as worthwhile, the bee would find value in its life.

When we ask about the meaning of life, we are asking about internal value. We are asking why we should feel that there is something in our lives that makes them worthwhile. Is there any project or goal that could make our lives choice worthy, could shape our psychology so dramatically that we are motivated to get up in the morning, keep going, and find all the trials and tribulations of life worthwhile?

We will see that Tolstoy initially believes that nothing can play this role, nothing could give life internal value. His argument relies on the assumption that life will only have internal value, it will be something that we can find choice worthy, if life has external value. Tolstoy initially thinks that death undermines any external value our lives might have. Our lives last a mere moment from the perspective of the universe. Even if our accomplishments outlive us, they too will one day be forgotten. We cannot even say that we live for our family; they will die in no time at all from the perspective of the universe.

Pessimism

Pessimism is the view that life has no meaning at all. The argument for it is straightforward:

1. Life is choice worthy only if it has internal value.
2. Life has internal value only if life has external value.
3. Life has no external value.
4. Life has no internal value (from 1–3).
5. Life is not choice worthy (from 1 & 4).

The two key premises are 2 and 3. Distinguish the question whether life is valuable from the question whether things like education, health, eradicating world hunger, writing a great novel, family, and so on are valuable. These latter

things are candidates for the goals and projects that we might find as valuable and so give to our lives internal value, i.e., these latter things are what make life choice worthy, something that we would choose to stay around for. Premise 2 says that any of these candidates can give life internal value only if they, themselves, have external value. Premise 3 says that no candidate does, in fact, have external value. Tolstoy argues for Premise 2 and 3 by way of a fable:

Figure 1: The sweetness of life?

> Imagine a traveller fleeing a ferocious, hungry beast. Our traveller's only means of escape is a well they stumble upon. They jump down to escape the infuriated beast who remains waiting at the well's edge. Some great trees grow beside our well, its roots jutting down and

> through its walls. The traveller reaches out, grabs the roots and saves himself from falling, which turns out quite fortuitous. As his eyes adjust, the traveller notices red glowing eyes at the bottom of the well. A dragon!
>
> Our traveler is stuck. The beast above awaits if he climbs up. The dragon below awaits if he climbs down. He pauses, clutching the roots growing from the cleft of the well wall. Things get worse. Two mice, one black and one white, appear and start nibbling on the roots. Our traveller realizes that the roots will break and inevitably he will fall into the dragon's jaws below.
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> While he is still clinging, he sees some drops of honey hanging on the roots, and so reaches out for them with his tongue. He tastes the sweetness, which distracts him for a while from the beast above, the dragon below, and the mice eating the roots.

This fable, says Tolstoy, depicts the life each of us live. The dragon and beast represent death. The mice represent time. The honey represents those things we use to distract ourselves from our mortality: family, career, etc. These are supposed to be what give our lives internal value, they are the things that make us think that life is choice worthy. But would you find the honey sweet if you were in that well? Maybe initially. But your awareness of the dragon, beast, and mice will likely dampen, if not destroy, your continued enjoyment of the honey. Similarly, Tolstoy suggests that none of the things we use to distract ourselves from our mortality can continue to do so indefinitely. He claims:

> "Just so I hold on to the branch of life, knowing that the dragon of death is waiting inevitably for me, ready to tear me to pieces, and I cannot understand why I have fallen on such suffering. And I try to lick that honey which used to give me pleasure, but now it no longer gives me joy, and the white and black mouse day and night nibble at the branch to which I am holding on. I clearly see the dragon, and the honey is no longer sweet to me. I see only the inevitable dragon and the mice, and am unable to turn my glance away from them. This is not a fable, but a veritable, indisputable, comprehensible truth." (Tolstoy, p.12)
>
> ''The deception of the joys of life which formerly allayed my terror of the dragon now no longer deceived me... The two drops of honey which diverted my eyes from the cruel truth longer than the rest: my love of family, and of writing - art as I called it - were no longer sweet to me." (Tolstoy, p.12)

> "Family"... said I to myself. But my family - wife and children - are also human. They are placed just as I am: they must either live in a lie or see the terrible truth. Why should they live? Why should I love them, guard them, bring them up, or watch them? That they may come to the despair that I feel, or else be stupid? Loving them, I cannot hide the truth from them: each step in knowledge leads them to the truth. And the truth is death....No sweetness of honey could be sweet to me when I saw the dragon and saw the mice gnawing away my support. (Tolstoy, p.12)

> It was indeed terrible. And to rid myself of the terror I wished to kill myself. I experienced terror at what awaited me—knew that that terror was even worse than the position I was in, but still I could not patiently await the end. However convincing the argument might be that in any case some vessel in my heart would give way, or something would burst and all would be over, I could not patiently await that end. The horror of darkness was too great, and I wished to free myself from it as quickly as possible by noose or bullet. That was the feeling which drew me most strongly towards suicide. (Tolstoy, p.13)

How do these remarks prove Premises 2 and 3? Let's take each in turn. Premise 2 we recall states that life has internal value only if life has external value. As a corollary, if life has no external value, then it has no internal value. Tolstoy's argument for this claim is hard to discerns, but seems to rely on claims about human psychology:

- a) I will find some project/goal valuable over a long period of time, only if I believe that project/goal is externally valuable.
- b) None of my projects/goals are externally valuable.
- c) I will inevitably discover that my projects/goals have no external value.
- d) I will inevitably cease to find internal value in my life (from a–c).
- e) I will inevitably cease to find life choice worthy (from d)

Let's hold our discussion of (c) until the next section and focus on (a) and (b). Tolstoy's doesn't do much to motivate (a), but it does seem to apply to a large number of people. Suppose, for instance, you dedicate your life to eradicating poverty, or writing the greatest novel, or caring for your children.

> News flash! An asteroid is heading our way. It will destroy Earth and all life in one month's time.

If this were true, many would struggle to keep working on their projects. The poverty fighter is unlikely to stay up late at night writing letters to congress arguing for poverty relief. The novelist is likely put down their pens when they stumble on a difficult passage. The parent who works 3 jobs to pay for their children's education is going to quit.

The asteroid won't hit us in 30 days time. But Tolstoy is asking us to really consider the fact that our death is inevitable. The poverty fighter will give up if the people they fight for will die within a month. Even though the sick and starving may not die in a month, they will die. It's inevitable. Even the human species will one day be more more. Consider the novelist. Perhaps there are those who will read her work in 200 years time. But 200 years is tiny blip in the history of the Universe. If beating yourself up over that novel isn't worth it if people might only read it for a week or two, why beat yourself up if people will not be around to read it in some years from now? Finally, our families will inevitably die. We fear their death. We put huge amount of time and energy into insuring that their death is far away and that they enjoy the time they have, which is really not that long regardless of how long the live. Tolstoy thinks nothing about this horrid position should make you strive to keep your family alive any longer.

Why does Tolstoy think that none of our projects have external value? I'll leave this as an exercise for us to discuss together.

Four Attitudes Toward Death

If Tolstoy's diagnosis of our lives is correct, there are four attitudes we can take towards our live. Tolstoy argues the first three are neither sustainable or rational, and so thinks the fourth is the only real option. Notice that the first provides our argument for (c):

1. Ignorance: It consists in not knowing, not understanding, that life is an evil and an absurdity. People of this sort have yet to see the dragon that awaits them. They have yet to see the mice gnawing the shrub by which they are hanging. The lick the honey. They do so only for a while: something will eventually turn their attention to the dragon and the mice. They will then stop their licking. (Tolstoy, p.22)

2. Epicureanism: while knowing the hopelessness of life, make use meanwhile of the advantages one has, disregarding the dragon and the mice, and licking the honey in the best way, especially if there is much of it within reach. This, though, is an unsustainable attitude. Many live in terrible conditions. Many have no honey to taste. It is a mere accident, claims Tolstoy, that you have good circumstances rather than poor, and ''the accident that has today made me a Solomon may tomorrow make me a Solomon's slave." Epicureans try but cannot ultimately forget that all

these pleasures are ephemeral. They are as easily lost as gained. Nobody can be confident that life will always provide these distractions. (Tolstoy, p.22)

3. Weakness: "It consists in seeing the truth of the situation and yet clinging to life, knowing in advance that nothing can come of it. People of this kind know that death is better than life, but not having the strength to act rationally - to end the deception quickly and kill themselves - they seem to wait for something. This is the escape of weakness, for if I know what is best and it is within my power, why not yield to what is best?" (Tolstoy, p.23)

4. Suicide: "This is the way of strength and energy. It consists in destroying life, when one has understood that it is an evil and an absurdity. A few exceptionally strong and consistent people act so. Having understood the stupidity of the joke that has been played on them, and having understood that it is better to be dead than to be alive, and that it is best of all not to exist, they act accordingly and promptly end this stupid joke." (Tolstoy, p.23)