

# PHI315 : good life, science fiction, and existentialism

## General

Today I want to discuss what we began to talk about on Friday. Namely, this idea that science fiction is capable of helping us explore the question of our purpose, of our existence, of the meaning of life, and of our relationship to death. We began to discuss Heidegger, the idea of being toward death, but I think we may have gotten a bit ahead of ourselves, since the movie ‘Melancholia’ was on my mind, since the point of that movie is hard to grasp. I did not grasp the point of the movie until I was 23. So, we will get to it when we get to it. Today, I want to really get to the point of how this sort of science fiction that we will engage in can help us live a good life.

## Recalling Stuff

So let us remember the method. What is science fiction supposed to help us do? Let us see if we can answer that. Then, let us answer, what is, among other purposes, is one purpose of philosophy that we adopted in this class?

The idea is that science fiction can help us explore possibilities that are not immediately evident to us in the present condition. Due to some technological or physical difference, the universe portrayed sheds light on something that remains obscure in our actual universe. We saw this with AI and also with Mind Uploading and all that.

As for philosophy, recall that the idea that one task is to not merely love wisdom but to obtain it, with the aim of living a good life. Now, we avoid definitions, but we do accept determinations. What did we determine to be a part of the good life? We determined that a good life is a life that, as you die, you look back on and say “well, that was not so bad” or that you basically do not have regret about.

We talked about Nietzsche last time, and we have also, if I recall correctly, discussed the notion of eternal recurrence. But, since we are doing existentialism and Nietzsche, as we saw, was a pre-cursor, we can bring this up again. Nietzsche asks:

Imagine now that you are walking at night and a demon pops up before you and tells you that you will have to repeat this life, in the exact same way, down to the littlest detail, will you cower in fear and cry in sadness? Or will you hug the demon, affirm life, and be willing to repeat it over and over again?

This is another instance of how to think about the good life. If you were in the position confronted by the demon, would you cry in sadness that this must repeat? If so, then you have not lived a good life and you must change things such that you can live a life that you would affirm. If you affirm the demon’s proposition, then you are doing okay. In fact, we will see exactly this dilemma come up in one of our films— *Donnie Darko*.

## So how are existential questions related to the good life?

Now, you might already think the answer is obvious. Who here has had an existential crisis? What was it like?

An existential crisis, among other things, is when it dawns on you that what you are doing and your life so far, it has been without a clear ground. In other words, in life, you thought something was meaningful, something was a purpose that kept you going, it was the “why” answer as to why you were doing what you were doing. Then, it becomes unstable, and you no longer have that purpose to keep you going. You question why you are here, what the purpose of your life is, and so on.

Now, it is hard to navigate these questions. We are unequipped for them. Often we get sent to people to talk to that may write this off as this or that, without a grounding in philosophical thinking of the good life. This is where these two come together, and where it becomes obvious why existential questions are connected to living the good life.

Recall that death is central to our determination of the good life. When you die, if you die, you will certainly for a moment consider: was this good? Maybe you will not ask explicitly. Maybe you will either be content or you will feel regret. Something will stand out. But, one way or another, it is when you are confronted with death that you will think about whether the life you have lived is a good one.

So death, as a tool, helps us reflect on that. This is why ‘Melancholia’ is so important, and why we will talk about that movie in light of Heidegger. I promised I would talk about Heidegger a bit, so I will now do it.

## Heidegger

Okay, I want to get some basic concepts on the table here. So I am just going to share them and then tie them together.

**Being-toward-Death:** Heidegger posits that human beings are unique in their ability to be conscious of their mortality. This awareness of death is a defining aspect of our existence. “Being-toward-death” is the realization and acceptance that death is an inevitable, personal, and non-relational fact of life. This consciousness is not about obsessing over death but rather understanding it as a certainty that gives life urgency and meaning.

**Resoluteness:** This concept is closely tied to the idea of authenticity. Resoluteness refers to the capacity to live one’s life with a decisive commitment to one’s chosen path, despite the ambiguity and uncertainty inherent in existence. It’s about owning one’s decisions and living in a way that’s true to one’s self, as opposed to conforming to the expectations or norms imposed by others.

**Authenticity:** Living authentically, in Heidegger’s view, means embracing one’s freedom and responsibility to make choices that define one’s own existence. Authentic living involves acknowledging and accepting the ‘thrownness’ of our existence (the fact that we find ourselves in a specific context that we didn’t choose), and the ‘facticity’ of our being, including our mortality.

So, now let me see if I can tie this together. When we immerse ourselves in science fiction, we are not just entertained; we are invited to confront existential dilemmas in a context that is detached from our immediate reality. This detachment allows us a unique perspective to reflect on our own lives, our own mortality, and the choices we make. Heidegger's notion of "Being-toward-Death" is particularly resonant in this genre, as many science fiction narratives directly or indirectly grapple with the inevitability of death and the finite nature of human existence. By confronting these themes in a speculative setting, we can explore our attitudes towards death and the kind of life we wish to lead.

Moreover, Heidegger's idea of "Resoluteness" and living authentically encourages us to take ownership of our lives and choices, a theme often mirrored in science fiction narratives where characters are faced with extraordinary decisions and moral dilemmas. These stories challenge us to consider how we might act under similar circumstances, pushing us to reflect on our values and the authenticity of our own lives.

In essence, science fiction serves as a canvas for existential exploration, mirroring the philosophical journey towards understanding and embracing our existence as defined by Heidegger. It encourages us to question, to reflect, and to confront the fundamental aspects of our being. This introspection, prompted by the imaginative scenarios of science fiction, can guide us towards living a life that, when faced with its end, we can look back upon without regret, embodying the essence of a good life as contemplated in this course. The exploration of these themes in films like "Melancholia" and "Donnie Darko" not only enriches our understanding of Heidegger's philosophy but also deepens our insight into what it means to live authentically and meaningfully in the face of the existential realities of life and death.