

## **0. Topic 1: Introduction**

In *A Confession*, Leo Tolstoy asked himself, *is there a meaning in my life which will not be eradicated by my death?* The author was going through an existential crisis when he wrote this book. At first glimpse, this question may seem like a trivial matter. When a person becomes aware of his death, how can he possibly go about his day ‘as usual’?

Tolstoy was on the verge of committing suicide as he contemplated the essence of his life. He had an affluent position in the Russian aristocracy. His wife and children were perfectly healthy. He had enjoyed a great success with his previous novels. Why could he not be happy? Tolstoy beat himself up over this question. In acknowledging death as an integral part of human life, he felt horrified, and completely powerless.

To Albert Camus, the question of human life and death was the fundamental question to be answered. ‘There is only one serious philosophical problem: suicide. To decide whether life is worth living or not worth living is to answer the most fundamental question of philosophy.’

I want to bring sense to all of this. Though a long process of evolution, we have developed quite large brains; our minds have been the engine behind a great many innovations. We are the only species on this earth which are aware of our own inevitable end. But why do we hold on to life? What is that which lends our lives meaning? Is there a consolation to be found in the briefness of our lives? I want to discuss a few authors and philosophers in hope to shed some light on this existential topic.

The reader may already think: *ah, this is going to be a sombre text.* Well, perhaps. I hope not, though.

## **1. Arthur Schopenhauer: How to understand the phenomenal world**

According to Arthur Schopenhauer, there are two aspects of our existence.

### *a) A will to life*

Schopenhauer said that all the objects in the phenomenal world are driven by *a will to life*; human beings not excluded.

He looked at the behaviour of other animals, and noticed the ways in which their behaviour bore resemblances to ours. For example, he noticed how all animals were driven to reproduce, and how these animals would take care of the well-being of their offspring. Schopenhauer assumed there was an innate drive to live (and to maintain life) in all living beings. Even the most heinous of animal creatures would produce offspring. They did not question their existence, nor feel compelled to end their lives. They went busily and happily, about their lives.

There is no rationality to be discovered in their behaviour, nor is there one to be found in ours; there is no higher being to lend our lives a fixed essence. (Albert Camus calls the friction between a will to life, and the acknowledgement of an inherently meaningless life, absurd.) The biological drives we all are born with, the drives concealed as human emotions, induce us to act in one way, instead of another. He did not believe we have free will. It is merely an illusion. It is all different ways in which *the will to life* manifests itself. 'We can do what we want, but we can't will what we want.' Our false inclinations merely arise in our minds.

This is not a particularly consoling thought.

*b) A striving to become*

All things in the phenomenal world desire to grow, Schopenhauer thought. Schopenhauer thought that all the objects in the phenomenal world, desired an end; even inanimate objects. A diamond is driven to grow, the fundamental structure of all the world is a heedless yearning for perfection. This was an attack on the enlightenment ideals that glorified the idea of progress. *What exactly are we progressing towards?*

*Absolute perfection?* What is this, and what would happen if we were to obtain absolute perfection in our lives?

His idea was that we would be bored. Supposing that all our current desires would be fulfilled, supposing that we obtained absolute perfection in our society and our personal lives, would we lean back and bask in a constant ecstasy of never-ending bliss? No.

For example, we may desire a raise, we may head into our superior's office, and we may ask for one. However, regardless of whether or not we would receive one, we could find a way to live with it. Assuming we did get a raise, would we not grow accustomed to it? Would we not seek another aspect of our lives which we could improve, or make more perfect?

When would real life start, if we constantly pursued an imagined end? Would our striving to become something greater, better, etc., ever be satisfied? Schopenhauer wanted us to reconsider the things we desire, which is a central idea to a Buddhist view on life; how the elimination of desire can lead to great happiness.

## **2. Alexander Pushkin: We don't know what we want**

We are bad judges of what we really want. We have a tendency to want the things we do not, or cannot have. The things in life possessing the most allure are *the things yet to come*. Imagined things. We love the unknown. From Alexander Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*:

*O humans! You're so similar to Eve, our ancestress;  
What's granted does not appeal to you at all,  
You hear the serpent's endless call,  
To where a secret tree is planted.*

*Forbidden fruit provides more spice;  
Without it, there's no paradise.*

Adam and Eve were given a life in paradise. They had an eternal life. Yet Eve eats the apple, she was bored and she wanted the unknown.

### **3. Søren Kierkegaard: The anxiety of the plenitudes of unlived lives**

Kierkegaard was the father of existentialism. He placed value on the individual's life. Albert Camus was inspired by him. Kierkegaard thought there was one emotion which separated human beings from other animals:

#### *a) The anxiety*

We are the only creatures on the face of this earth which has feelings of anxiety. Why? We have the capability of reason, and we know that one day, we will die. We are conceived as temporal beings. There is an external thing, a limit to our lives, which defines our lives, which is time. It forces us to make decisions we do not know how to make. We cannot do everything in the span of a lifetime; therefore we have to find out the things that matter to us *individually*.

What makes  $x$  a better life choice than  $y$ ? When we make decisions in life, if we were to pursue  $x$  all the way through, we would not be able to pursue  $y$ . We know there is a limit to the things we can experience in the course of a lifetime. We are often in a situation where we cannot do both  $x$  and  $y$ . Anxiety comes from the knowledge that at any given point in our lives, we could be doing something radically different. *We feel it.*

We are born into a world of endless possibilities, and we are anxious of the plenitudes of unlived lives when we commit ourselves to one life path.

#### *b) Solution to the anxiety*

Kierkegaard thinks it is important to do something about the anxiety. He emphasises a belief in free will, a leap of faith. The future is unknowable, the only thing we have is the past and present. 'Life can only be understood backwards, but must be lived forwards.'

He thought we should turn to faith in god. I will ignore his religious views, though it is an interesting part of his philosophy. I do not think you need to be a religious person to accept the solution to existential anxiety. It is the idea of the unknown aspects of our lives, and the unknown aspects of the future that are consoling.

### **4. Aldous Huxley: Where does compassion come from?**

I think the most important faculties of human beings are the faculties of compassion and sympathy. So there is a great wisdom to be drawn from the dystopian novels.

In Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, there exists no pain of any sort. The modern technology of the day has developed a type of drug which removes all negative emotions.

*Feeling jealous?* Have this pill. *Feeling angry?* No problem. However, this invention reduces the human existence to a robot-like existence.

What is significant about a robot-like existence? There could absolutely not be any need for compassion among robots. They would be invincible; they would run on batteries that could last forever. There would be no temporality to their existence. (Or: why would we create one?) There has also been a philosophical debate whether or not a robot can think like a human being. Assuming that a robot is created which has all the basic functions of a human being, the same drives, yet no temporality: would he bear any resemblance to us at all? The essential part is gone; there is no longer an inherent vulnerability to him. Nor are the persons in Huxley's *Brave New World* vulnerable, as they have eliminated grief. Thus, there would be no need for any compassion and sympathy.

Through recognising the other person's will to life, and his inability to fulfil his desire for all eternity, is it not what can make us sympathetic towards other people's emotions and sufferings? What makes possible a compassion and sympathy, is the acknowledgement of our inevitable demise and other's inevitable demise.

## **5. The conclusion: the essence of man**

I do not suppose that I have the ultimate answer to Camus' fundamental question. It is very hard to form a coherent opinion about all of this. Tolstoy wrote: *there is no explanation*. It may be so. There are no truths in philosophy, but I want to postulate three, which are subject to scepticism.

**Truth 1:** Human beings are vulnerable and temporal. That is not something bad.

It is unfair that we will die, and that our loved ones die will as well. It is unfair that anyone should die. But although we may yearn for an eternal life, I do not believe that this pursuit is the solution to our sufferings. Rather, it would subtract a great deal from our lives. There would be no point in being nice to one another.

Economics deals with the transaction of *scarce* goods and resources. When we offer our labours, we give up a piece of our lives, a piece of our scarce time. So:

**Truth 2:** Human lives are scarce. Therefore: valuable.

**Truth 3:** We want the things which we do not possess. Then we get bored.

When our desires are met, we are bored. Were we to live forever, we would be bored. We would not find any things enjoyable. We would have taken them for granted. Were we to indulge in the tastiest treats day in and day out, we would have grown accustomed to them.

We would venture out to seek out other pleasures, and still we would be left unsatisfied.

I believe, although my memory may betray me, Albert Camus said that we should die, our lives feeling unresolved, and ourselves feeling unsatisfied. We need to obtain the friction between a will to life and a will to meaning. Camus died in a motorcycle accident.

That is his point; we are not in control of when we die, we can be in control of when and how we live. There is a great meaning to temporality, and a great importance in living well.