

## **“IS THERE A MEANING TO LIFE?” CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS**

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**Keynote: Do You Have to be Religious to find Meaning in Life?**

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One of the frustrating things about philosophers is that they are often reluctant to give simple answers to questions. You can ask what seems like a clear-cut yes-or-no question and get a series of clarifications and distinctions that leaves the impression that you can answer the question you asked only after you have addressed a half-dozen or so other questions. I want to admit that philosophers do sometimes unnecessarily complicate things. But I would also suggest that sometimes they are reluctant to give simple answers because these answers can be misleading. My title question today is an example. If I am asked whether you need to be religious in order to find meaning in life, I have some inclination to give a fairly simple answer: No, of course not. But the reason that answer is likely to be misleading is that it's not quite clear what finding meaning in life amounts to. Sometimes when people reflect on the kind of meaning that is available on a nonreligious understanding of things, they find it unsatisfactory. What they are looking for when they seek meaning in life could only be found if some kind of religious account is correct. So the question turns on what sort of meaning we are considering, and we really do need to decide about that in order to know whether we are answering the question we intend to ask. I'll start with the kind of meaning that almost anyone can find.

I teach a course called “Ethics and Good Living”. At one point in the course I announce to students that I will be telling them how to live a meaningful life. Since finding meaning in life is usually thought of as something that most people should regard as valuable, I suggest to them that this instruction will be worth the price of their tuition. Then I offer them a simple formula:

To live a meaningful life is to be fully involved much of the time in doing what you judge to be most important.

I usually develop my formula a little by introducing some technical terminology. The technical terms are **engagement** and **reflection**. To be **engaged** in an activity is to be fully involved in it. You have probably had the experience of becoming engrossed in something that captured your attention and focused your interest. It might have been something like climbing a mountain or playing a computer game. Or it might have been something like meeting another person you felt a kinship with and discovering the fascination of talking with that person for hours. Contrast these kinds of experiences with cases in which you are doing something you don't really want to do or when you're not giving full attention to what you are doing. We should note that what you can become engaged in sometimes depends on whether you have developed particular skills and knowledge. Someone who has devoted long hours and effort to becoming a physicist might be capable of being engaged by a scientific research program that holds the promise of discovering unknown truths about the universe, but someone without the skills and knowledge wouldn't be able to enter into such an activity. It's also true that what you can become fully involved in depends on what you care about. Some people are fascinated by looking at antiques, whereas I have to be dragged into an antique store. What I mostly want to emphasize here is that engagement is an important part of living a desirable life. If not much really engages you, you're like a spectator on your own life rather than a participant.

One kind of engagement is what one psychologist has called flow experiences. In flow experiences people report a sense of effortlessness and loss of awareness of time and even awareness of themselves. These experiences are different from what we typically think of as experiencing pleasure. Yet people who have flow experiences tend to describe them as intensely

satisfying. Some kinds of athletic activities or musical performance can give rise to flow experiences, but flow can also occur in tasks as varied as performing heart surgery or writing a novel. Flow experiences could be thought of as cases in which engagement slips into high gear. There's an attunement between the doer and the act.

Besides **engagement**, the other technical term I am using is **reflection**. Here I am referring to our capacity to stand back and think about what we are doing. So, for example, you might think about how well or how badly you did when you gave a presentation or did a musical performance. Or you might think about whether all the time you are spending going to class and doing assignments is worth the effort. It's often not a good idea to try to reflect on an activity while you are doing it, and it would be unwise to try to reflect about everything you do. You could drive yourself crazy. But there is also something undesirable about reflecting too little on your activities. Imagine someone who decides to get married without considering carefully whether doing so is a good idea. Or think of people who go through life doing the kinds of things that others expect them to do without ever asking why. The kind of reflection that seems to me most relevant to thinking about finding meaning in life involves what could be called judgments of importance. We can stand back and look at our activities and judge some of what we do to be relatively or even completely unimportant, but most of us also judge some things we do or might do to be important or very important.

I need to be clear that when I speak of judgments importance, I am not talking merely about whether something is important to you or beneficial from your individual point of view. If it's important for you to get a good education, it's likely to be important in general that people get a good education. If it's important for you to be healthy, then it's also important for other people to be healthy. Thinking about what is important pushes us toward a wider perspective in

which our concerns to promote our individual interest have a place, but only in relation to a more comprehensive understanding of what is valuable. One of the ways not to have a meaningful life is to get caught up in narrowly self-interested concerns. Living meaningful lives involves caring about things beyond ourselves.

You will recall that my original formula for living a meaningful life was to be fully involved much of the time in what you judge most important. To bring in my technical terms, living a meaningful life means bringing your capacities for engagement into harmony with your reflective judgment about what is important to do. Now it doesn't take much observation to realize that your reflective self and your engaged self are not automatically in harmony. For most of us, there is a major divergence between what we do and what we reflectively judge valuable or worthy. It's possible to spend endless hours doing what from your own point of view is a waste of time, or if not a complete waste, something that should be deplored for squeezing out things that are much more important. You might think that spending time talking to family members is fairly high on your priority list, yet not spend much time doing it. Or you might think that watching TV is not very valuable compared with other things that you might do, yet spend lots of time in front of the television. Escapist activities or pleasant diversions can have a kind of hypnotic effect that lulls you into habitually doing what your reflective self might judge lacking in worth and what in some cases is not even satisfying. So it's possible to realize that your life lacks meaning because you are not focused enough on the kinds of things that seem to you to be of highest value. To make your life more meaningful, you may need to become the kind of person who cares about and is able to get caught up in activities you judge to be more important.

Even though I think that there is something to be learned from my simple formula about living a meaningful life, I want to suggest that it's too simple. One reason is that it doesn't take

into account that we can be mistaken about what is valuable. You might think that something is especially important because your thinking is short-sighted or you don't understand what it would be like to achieve some goal or you haven't fully comprehended the effects on others. Sometimes we change our minds about what is valuable. At one point something seemed all-important, but after we have more experience or more knowledge, its value seems less. Furthermore, sometimes we don't change our minds, but if we had been thinking much at all, we should have seen that what we were treating as very important is really less important than things we are neglecting. So here's the complication: suppose that you are engaged in doing things that seem from your own point of view to be very important, but your judgment is defective. Let me make this extreme by imagining that your great project in life is to create the master race and get rid of everyone who is unfit. In other words you have Nazi values. So if you dedicate your life to achieving your Nazi values, are you then living a meaningful life?

What this example shows, I think, is that my formula is really about living a life that is subjectively meaningful. A life is **subjectively meaningful** when a person is significantly engaged in activities that from her own reflective point of view seem most important, but achieving subjective meaning is not necessarily enough to achieve **objective meaning**. The person with Nazi values might be living a subjectively meaningful life, but because those values are (to use the technical term) screwed up, the life is not objectively meaningful.

Making this kind of distinction seems to call for some account of how we can tell when values have only subjective status and when they can be thought of as objectively established. I am not going to address that question directly, except to say two things: First, most of us think that there are good reasons to regard some judgments of value as mistaken, even if we are not always be in a position to say authoritatively what judgments are objectively correct, or with

regard to some things, whether multiple and divergent claims might be equally correct. So the closest we can get to achieving lives that are objectively meaningful may be to rely on our best reflective judgment about what is important to do, but with the added admonition that our reflection needs to be fully informed and should be open to correction. In other words our access to objective meaning is through doing our best to purify our subjective conclusions about value. My second observation is that our disagreements about what is important are sometimes connected with disagreements about what might be called worldview issues. So, for example, if one person understands the significance of our lives in relation to God and someone else thinks that God does not exist, it's likely that those differences will give rise to some differences in judgments of what is most important and, hence, what would make life meaningful. So achieving an objectively meaningful life might depend on finding a worldview that is closest to the truth, but, to say the least, it's notoriously difficult to know for sure that your worldview conclusions are correct. Hence, you might be able to achieve an objectively meaningful life without knowing for sure that you had done so, and you might live a life that is lacking in objective meaning without recognizing it.

I will return later to the question of how differences about worldview issues are related to differences with regard to the sort of meaning we might aspire to have. But for the moment, rather than pursuing the admittedly interesting issue of subjectivity and objectivity in making judgments of importance, I want to change the focus to a related but distinguishable concern. Whether something is valuable or important seems to depend on the point of view from which you are considering it. For example, when you get home tonight, it may seem important to you to find something to cook for dinner. But suppose you think about cooking something for dinner tonight in the context of thinking about your whole life. From that wider perspective, finding

something to cook for dinner on a particular evening seems much less important. In ten years time what you had for dinner tonight or whether you skipped dinner altogether might seem relatively insignificant, whereas if you did something today such as getting married or joining the army, that decision might still seem very significant. So the question we need to ask about the idea of becoming engaged in activities that you reflectively judge important is from what perspective are the judgments of importance to be made.

To show how perspective can shape our judgments of importance, I want to use a historical example of someone reflecting on whether his life is meaningful. The Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy came to a point in his life in which he was plunged into despair by the thought that his life was meaningless because there was nothing he could do that would achieve anything of real worth. He describes his thought process in an autobiographical work entitled *A Confession*. Tolstoy had been educated into the Christian faith as a child, but by the age of eighteen, he had discarded any religious belief. He was fairly content with his life until his late forties, when according to his own account he lost his motivation to do much of anything. In his own words,

My life came to a standstill. I could breathe, eat, drink and sleep and I could not help breathing, eating, drinking and sleeping; but there was no life in me because I had no desires whose gratification I would have deemed it reasonable to fulfill. If I wanted something I knew in advance that whether or not I satisfied my desire nothing would come of it.

What Tolstoy describes is a kind of reflective disengagement from his own life that undermined his motivation to do much at all. It is as if he is going through the motions of living while his

reflective self casts a critical eye not only on what he is doing, but on anything he might do, judging that nothing is worth doing. Tolstoy says,

If a magician had come and offered to grant my wishes I would not have known what to say. If in my intoxicated moments I still had the habit of desire, in my sober moments I knew that it was a delusion and that I wanted nothing. I did not even wish to know the truth because I had guessed what it was. The truth was that life was meaningless.

All of us know what it is to find some activity pointless. One of my favorite examples comes from the experience of the soldier whose commanding officer tells him to dig a foxhole in a certain location. Once the foxhole has been dug, the soldier is told to fill it back up. Then he's told to dig another foxhole, and, you guessed it, fill it up again. Such an activity contrasts with cases where we are doing something in order to achieve a particular goal that seems to us worth achieving. It is possible, however, to look at something that does not seem pointless and to ask whether what we are aiming at really is worth achieving. You could think that working hard in a particular course is important because you need to pass the course in order to graduate. But what if you come to the point of wondering whether graduating is important or whether it will lead to anything that you can regard as valuable? Then what seemed to have a point might come to look pointless to you. When Tolstoy begins to consider various goals that might give meaning to his activities, he becomes skeptical that achieving any of his goals amounts to anything significant.

Tolstoy's judgment that life is meaningless because nothing he can do is important arises when he looks at his life from the perspective of a kind of external observer who views it at critical distance. Imagine, for example, someone writing a biography of Tolstoy at some point



after his death. From this external point of view, Tolstoy's life occupies a particular period of time. He lives, and then he dies. His accomplishments have various effects, but judging the significance of his achievements will mean looking at them as items in a larger frame of reference. Thinking about his own achievements from a very wide frame of reference, Tolstoy says that when his life is over, "... nothing will remain other than stench and worms. Sooner or later my deeds, whatever they have been, will be forgotten and will no longer exist." This thought leads him to wonder, "What is all the fuss about them?" That is, why do I put so much time and effort into trying to do what from a wider perspective is insignificant.

In order to be engaged in what we are doing, we have to passionately care achieving certain goals. In Tolstoy's case the things that engaged him most were his writing and his family. But when he considers his life as if he were an outside observer, he finds it hard to see his concerns as worth all the passion. Whatever he might accomplish would ultimately be destroyed. If he wrote great novels, they would in time be forgotten. If he cared for his family, they would eventually be dead and gone. Furthermore, Tolstoy thinks that his conclusions about his own life apply to everyone's life, even if others are too unreflective to face the truth.

What is it about the relative impermanence of accomplishments that is so troubling for Tolstoy? Well, let's try a thought experiment about someone who devotes his life to achieving something that lasts a relatively short time. Imagine a man who gets up every day and builds a sandcastle on the beach. Imagine that he builds very elaborate sandcastles with moats and towers and all sorts of interesting details. Each day when the tide comes in, that day's castle is destroyed, and each day the man goes back to build a new one. It's not a stretch to imagine that at some point the man might lose interest in continuing. He might reason that it is pointless to spend so much time and effort on what will be destroyed before the day is over, and if he has

friends, they might well agree and encourage him to give up his sandcastle-building efforts and find other pursuits.

Of course, even if it's hard to sustain the kind of passion needed to continue when we perceive our own achievements as ephemeral, there are obviously things in life with more permanence than sand castles. However, how long-lasting something seems depends on the perspective from which we consider it. Tolstoy's writings may last for thousands of years, but if one takes a long-enough view, it is possible to see in them the same lack of any enduring value that caused our imagined sandcastle builder to lose heart. Whether they last for thousands or even millions of years, they will eventually cease to be read or cease to exist. If we take a big enough time span, they are like a small blip that is hardly noticeable.

Tolstoy has obviously set very high standards for the possibility of doing anything worthwhile. Ordinarily we recognize the endurance of an achievement as having something to do with its value, but we do not think that achievements must have effects that last forever in order to be regarded as valuable. On the other hand, Tolstoy's judgments do resemble comparative judgment that we understand. Imagine comparing the accomplishments of the sand-castle builder whose work lasts less than a day to the accomplishments of a cathedral builder whose work may last thousands of years. From the ordinary human perspective, we might encourage the sand-castle builder to devote his talents to something of more lasting value, such as cathedral building. Tolstoy takes a perspective from which all human activities, including cathedral building, amount to very little. He looks at human activities from what we might call a cosmic perspective. From this perspective the achievements of the cathedral builder seem just as transient as those of the sand-castle builder look from the ordinary human point of view. From Tolstoy's viewpoint, the only satisfactory achievement would be something of eternal value.

One way of responding to Tolstoy is to suggest that he is setting the standards too high. Tolstoy shows that it is possible to assume a point of view from which the significance of any of our activities looks microscopically small. He does so by looking at his own life in the context of a large time span. Others have suggested something similar by thinking about human life in relation to the vastness of the universe. If you have ever gone to a planetarium and seen planet earth as viewed from space and then seen the point of view shift to where earth is viewed in the distance and eventually becomes indiscernible in a mass of galaxies, which themselves are small in relation to the whole universe, you may have felt a similar sense of the insignificance of human life. We live as inhabitants of one minor planet within a huge universe. What we do may seem important to us, but in the larger scheme of things, it looks hardly noticeable.

But we might ask, even if there are points of view from which our activities seem insignificant, should those judgments have the authority to cancel the recognition of value from every other viewpoint. Even if caring for the needs of my children seems unimportant in the cosmic scheme of things, it could still be something I judge to have real worth from a more ordinary human point of view. From our ordinary human point of view, enjoying a sunset, or memorizing a poem may be worthwhile things to do, whether or not they contribute to any far-reaching ends. Developing a friendship or becoming a skilled counselor or composing a play may be projects an individual can regard as worth a great deal of time and effort. So perhaps we ought to take a more down-to-earth perspective, assessing value in relation to more realistic expectations about what a human being could accomplish.

I think that there is merit in pointing out the divergence of Tolstoy's judgments about value from the judgments we make from a more ordinary human viewpoint. But I don't think that appealing to our ordinary judgments of value removes completely the kind of concern that

worried Tolstoy. To show why, let me use an example taken from the philosopher Richard Taylor. Taylor has described the lives of members of a particular species of worms, inhabiting the dark ceiling of a cave until it is transformed into a flying insect that will live only a day or two. During that time, it mates, lays eggs, and then is caught up and devoured by the worms from which it came. Now however we might imagine things seem to the worms, when we look at the lives of these creatures, it is hard for us to see any meaning or significance. In fact, for many people the dominant impression is one of a cyclic process that evokes a sense of futility or pointlessness. If we could imagine these creatures being able to look at their lives as we do, then they might despair of living.

But then imagine an external observer looking at the activities that engage members of our species. Humans spend countless hours eating and mating and sleeping. They busy themselves with various kinds of work, some of which contributes to fulfilling human needs and some of which do not. They shop for clothes that they hope will continue to be in fashion. They compose philosophical presentations. They do various things to impress each other. They compose numerous text messages, sometimes to people in the same room. They travel long distances. They get into conflict and fight. They raise children. They try to entertain themselves. They get old and die. Is there something about all these activities that makes it seem as if something of real importance is accomplished? Even if these individuals are passionately engaged in what they do, when we look at their activities from a perspective that is not internal to the species, our impressions may resemble the sense of pointlessness we have when we think about the lives of those worms. Judging human lives meaningful seems to depend on accepting a point of view structured by concerns that humans adopt easily enough, but that point of view

seems suspect when we think of human valuing as a product of human subjectivity that drops out when we consider things in more objective terms.

The issue here arises because human beings have the capacity for looking at their lives with varying degrees of subjectivity and objectivity, and they have urges to try to bring these different viewpoints into some kind of unity. We can recognize cases in which a more objective perspective shows the need to realign a more subjective perspective. For example, there are things that matter to us from our individual point of view, but when we recognize that our point of view is just one of many, we judge that it needs to be integrated with the more objective point of view of what is good for our community or for members of our species. We can integrate the more subjective with the more objective by assuming a moral point of view that recognizes the legitimacy of what individuals want, but only within limits. However, the moral point of view can also be seen as a product of human subjectivity. It is the way things seem to individuals who are equipped with particular sensibilities that incline them to make judgments about things like justice. So once we consider our moral judgments from a more objective point of view, can we still recognize the more subjective assessments as carrying any authority?

Tolstoy exhibits a concern to unify his sense of what is objectively true with the judgments of value that are needed to find meaning in life when he tries to think about human value judgments in the light of the scientific picture of reality he accepts. Science, as Tolstoy describes it, provides a picture of reality as material particles undergoing various changes in space and time. A human being, on this account is in his words a “temporary, incidental accumulation of particles.” Tolstoy takes this scientific picture to be the objective truth about things, and his problem is trying to fit human aspirations to do things that are worthwhile with this kind of picture. From the scientific point of view, these aspirations look like a kind of

accidental byproduct of a material system. If the material system is what is objectively real, it's difficult to think of the human sense of what matters as carrying much weight.

We could say that certain things matter to us, even if they don't matter from the more objective point of view described by science. However, we are creatures who understand ourselves both from the point of view of the way things seem to us and from a more objective point of view in which we are elements of a larger whole. We recognize the authority of the wider perspective because our place in the bigger picture is part of our self-image. Furthermore, we are used to overruling some subjective judgments that don't sufficiently take into account the wider point of view. When I judge some of my individual concerns as excessive, it is often because I recognize I am only one person and the world does not revolve around me. So when I think about the human species and the concerns that members of that species have, shouldn't I remind myself that the universe does not revolve around the concerns of my species? But in that case, is it enough to say that some things matter to us? There is an urge to want to view our sense of what is valuable as having a status greater than just preferences that are hard-wired into us.

What would it take to satisfy Tolstoy? I think it would take an account of what humans might accomplish that could be recognized as valuable not only from the point of view of our species, but from an objective point of view that transcends the human species, and which represents what we take to be ultimately real. But when we put it that way, it is apparent that what he is asking for is precisely the kind of thing that religious visions offer. Religious traditions tell stories about some larger context within in which we are urged to understand our lives and to view a certain kind of fulfillment as a way to achieve harmony with reality.

For example, in classical Hinduism the ultimate reality is called Brahman. At the deepest level each of us is united with Brahman. However, we are stuck in a dreamlike reality that obscures our true nature. When we give common sense descriptions or scientific descriptions, we are dealing with the dreamlike realm of appearances, not what is real at the deepest level. Our task is to come into harmony with the nature of things by discovering, not just intellectually, but experientially, the truth about our nature and by structuring our lives in ways that allow us to achieve liberation from our state of ignorance. Ordinary human concerns take on a different significance when viewed in the light of this fundamental concern.

In Buddhism the ultimate truth of things is that the sense of a substantial self and a substantial reality that we presume when we devote ourselves to satisfying our cravings is an illusion. What we take to be the self is a temporary combination of elements that is constantly changing, rather than anything permanent that persists through time. If we undertake the path that will free us from the illusion of self, we can overcome the cravings that lead to suffering and achieve a state of Nirvana, which puts us into harmony with the nature of things. To embark on the path, we must learn the disciplines that allow us to put our ordinary concerns in proper perspective.

In Abrahamic religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam human fulfillment is to be found in relation to a supreme goodness called God. We can be properly related to this supreme goodness, or we can resist and reject the claims of God on us. In the Christian version the fulfillment called salvation involves changing our attitudes and developing our capacities to love what is good, which includes becoming the kind of people who can genuinely love each other. To embark on the path that leads to salvation is to become what we were intended to be

and achieve harmony with the love that underlies all things. Understanding our ordinary concerns in the light of this supreme concern shapes our awareness of their relative importance.

Each of these religious traditions tells a story of what is ultimately real and ultimately valuable, and the stories provide guidance about how to fit our lives into this larger frame of reference. What makes life meaningful on such accounts is the possibility of achieving something that can be recognized as valuable in relation to the most encompassing context. Tolstoy came to the conclusion that it would take a religious story to give him the kind of meaning he was seeking, and he thought that without this kind of meaning, he lacked sufficient motivation to continue. Hence, he found himself reconsidering religious views he had previously rejected. In the end he became convinced that a particular version of the Christian story was true, and in coming to believe it, he was able to affirm a kind of meaning for his life that he judged unattainable on any nonreligious view.

Someone who rejects any kind of religious story and takes science to reveal the ultimate truth about things will very likely suggest that the kind of meaning Tolstoy was looking for is not to be found. When we tell the ultimate truth about our place in the universe, we cannot fit our concerns into a larger picture that reveals the possibility of some kind of transcendent fulfillment. From the most objective point of view we can take about the universe, human aspirations do not matter. Nevertheless, it might be claimed, we do not need an endorsement from a larger context to give our lives meaning. We can find plenty of concerns that are sufficiently worthy to engage us.

If we are convinced that no religious story is plausible, then it makes sense to adjust whatever inclinations we have to be attracted by the kind of fulfillment that religious stories



describe and aspire only to the kind of meaning that a nonreligious understanding would allow. But not everyone is in that position. Many people find religious accounts worth considering and some find a particular religious account more believable than any alternative comprehensive understanding of things. To such an individual, the kind of meaning available in a nonreligious story may seem deficient by comparison. Once I think that a cosmic drama of redemption is going on, having to settle for ends that are much less grand seems like a let-down.

Let me put the issue in a different way. It's possible to describe activities in ways that give them different kinds of significance. For example, you might do something that you describe as "having sex" but in the right circumstances, it might also be described as "making love". Or you might describe what you are doing as "making marks on a page" but given the right kind of circumstances, it might be "finishing my novel". The meaningfulness or lack of meaningfulness of an activity depends in many cases on what we conceive ourselves to be doing, and finding greater meaning is often a matter of seeing how an activity fits within some larger story which puts it in context. Furthermore, the grandest meanings generally are connected with grand stories. Frodo's actions in *Lord of the Rings* have the significance they do because he is playing his role in a cosmic battle between the forces of good and evil.

Whether or not a particular way of describing our activities works can depend on what stories are available to us. For example, Viktor Frankl tells of trying to help fellow prisoners in Nazi concentration camps deal with their suffering by teaching them a way of thinking about their suffering. He urged them to think of their suffering as a task that they had been given, rather than viewing themselves as helpless victims. They could respond to their task, he suggested, by giving in, or they could adopt attitudes that enabled them to preserve whatever human dignity they could in a terrible situation. The question, said Frankl, is not what you expect of life, but

what life is expecting of you. The way of thinking that Frankl encourages fits easily into a certain kind of religious story. It makes sense to think of life as a task if we can think of such a task as being assigned to us by God and imagine that there is some good purpose to be achieved. But suppose we don't have an understanding of things that includes anything like God. Can we really ask what life expects of us apart from personifying life in a questionable way? We could perhaps ask what we expect of ourselves, but then the whole idea of assigning ourselves a task seems odd, and the rhetorical force of the idea is lost. The point is that the ways of finding meaning that are available to us depend on the kind of larger story we tell about the human situation, and some kinds of meaning that fit in a religious worldview don't fit in a nonreligious one.

All of this leads me to a reaction that some religious people have to secular versions of how to find meaning in life. They find the account of meaning you can give on such stories a little flat. It's as if you thought you were on a quest to achieve some noble end and someone comes along to inform you that what you thought was a quest is only a trip from point A to point B. If that's all you are doing, then you might be able to adjust to describing your life in a different way, but having to make that adjustment involves the loss of a kind of meaning that might well be connected with important motivations. Admittedly, Tolstoy's conclusion that if there is no religious meaning, there is no meaning at all seems like an overreaction. But perhaps it is an understandable overreaction when we realize that some of the meanings we might have to give up in renouncing any sort of religious view, involve the loss of understandings of human life that an individual might regard as essential.

It might be said that the whole question of whether one finds a particular kind of meaning hard to adjust to is largely irrelevant because we ought to be deciding about religious and nonreligious stories on the basis of evidence. I've addressed this issue at great length in other

places and can only briefly outline my view here. What I would suggest is that the comprehensive stories that we use to structure to our experience and orient us in life are not decidable through making an evidential assessment from a neutral perspective. What convinces us is something closer to trying on the outlook a particular story provides and finding that it satisfies both our theoretical and practical concerns better than alternatives we are aware of. The story that qualifies must fit with what we take to be the facts, but it also needs to engage us as practical agents who seek the kind of life we can judge worthy. The fact that we desire a particular kind of meaning is not by itself reason to adopt a religious account, but when a particular kind of story makes meanings that connect with deep motivations intelligible, we have a reason for seriously considering whether that story might be true.

So, do you have to be religious to find meaning in life? My inclination to say no arises from the thought that if you accept a nonreligious view, you are likely to be able to find some activities that you think sufficiently important to engage you. But that's a big if. If you have felt the appeal of a religious vision of things, then it may be that the kind of meaning that is available only on a religious account will seem like something you cannot do without.