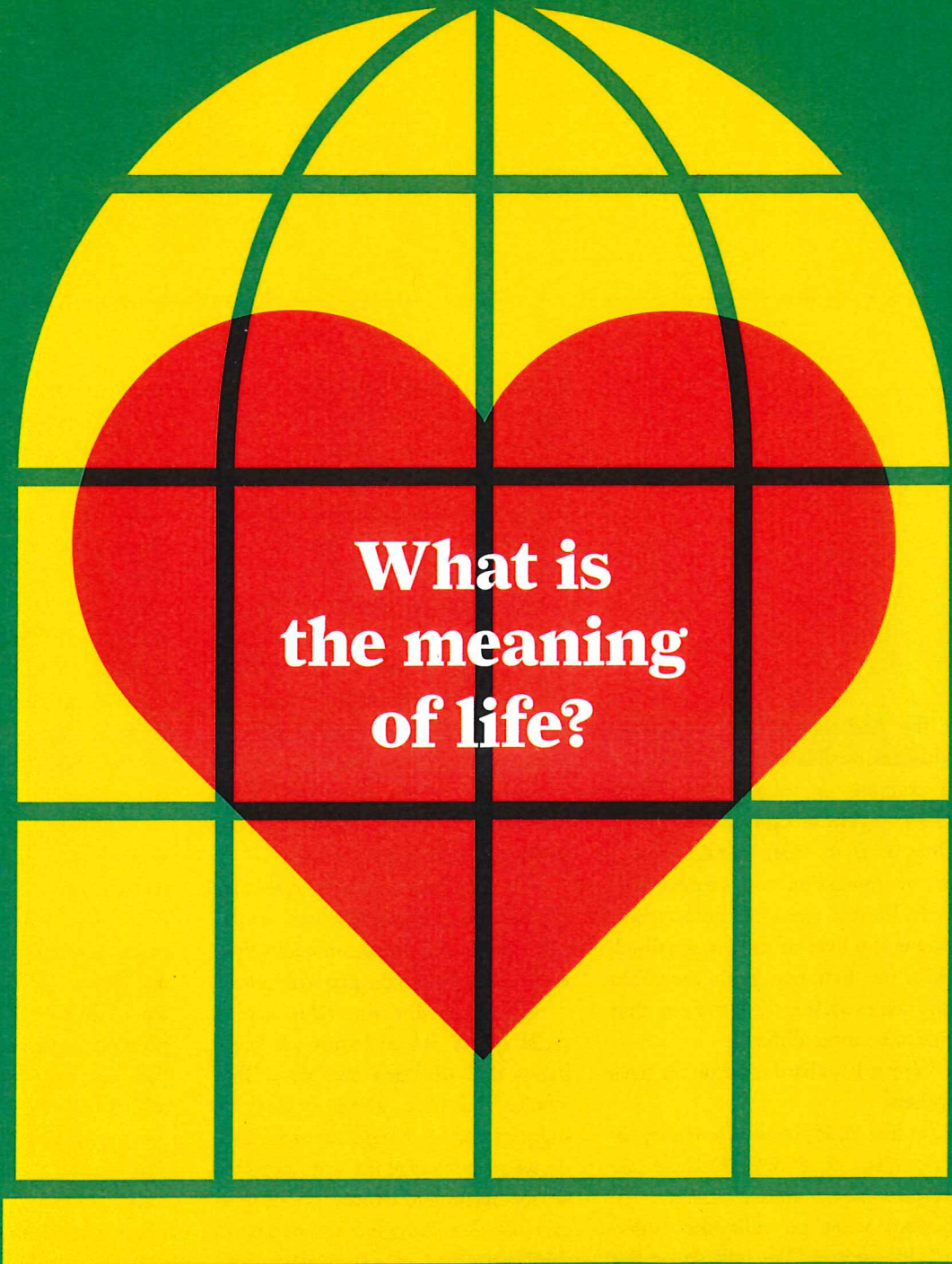


THE SIXTH EXTINCTION

NewPhilosopher



**What is
the meaning
of life?**

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NIGEL WARBURTON
Thinking about your death



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by Myisha Cherry

Whose life matters?

The hashtags #BlackLivesMatter, #MuslimLivesMatter, and #Libya are examples of value-laden slogans etched on protest signs and typed on online posts in order to raise awareness of oppression and express self-worth. These slogans also invite others to value the lives of the marginalised. While the first two goals are often easily achieved, it is the latter aim that tends to be more difficult.

Why is it so hard to value the lives of others?

In his 2016 book *Democracy in Black: How Race Still Enslaves the American Soul*, Eddie Glaude Jr. describes what he calls the “value gap”. He writes: “We talk about the achievement gap in education or the wealth gap between white Americans and other groups, but the value gap reflects something more basic: that no

matter our stated principles or how much progress we think we’ve made, white people are valued more than others in this country, and that fact continues to shape the life chances of millions of Americans. The value gap is in our national DNA.”

The value gap is not only a gap in value as it relates to blacks and whites in the US. It is also a gap in valuing other groups. All around the world, insiders are valued more than outsiders; settlers are valued more than indigenous peoples; men are valued more than women; and the rich are valued more than the poor.

Certain barriers must be overcome to close the gap and these barriers unsurprisingly share a commonality. Until we tackle them, the gap will remain.

Glaude credits the value gap to racial habits. Racial habits are social habits that we learn over time. They involve our ideas about others. He suggests that to change our racial habits, we must change the ways in which we see blacks and whites. Philosophical work on valuing has also come to a similar conclusion as it relates to normative judgements. The context is not restricted to race.

Joshua Knobe and Erica Preston-Roedder claim that to value is not only

to have certain psychological attitudes, but also involves normative judgements. That is say, it is not just my attitude towards you that determines if I value you; it is my normative judgement of you as good or bad that determines it. If we think the person is not good but rather bad, we are less prone to value them. So the difficulty in valuing others is also the normative judgements we make about certain groups. The challenge in valuing all lives is to rid ourselves of false stereotypical beliefs that inform our judgements of them.

Partiality is also a reason why valuing lives is difficult. The partiality view holds that certain lives aren’t *better* than others but that our intimates’ interests *matter more* than others. Reasons for partiality are because we are in a relationship with our intimates; there are certain facts about their value; and our intimates play a role in our deep commitments and projects. The problem with partiality is that if we truly considered these reasons, it would either expand to whom we are partial towards since we are in relationships with more than our intimates, or it will eventually erase any possible suitors for partiality – since no human is perfect we are bound to give people less reason to value us.

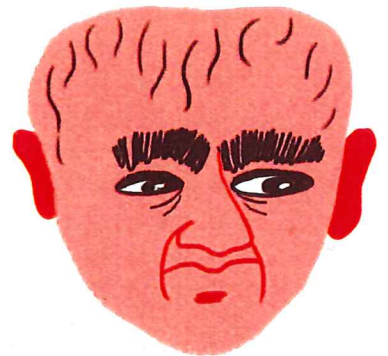
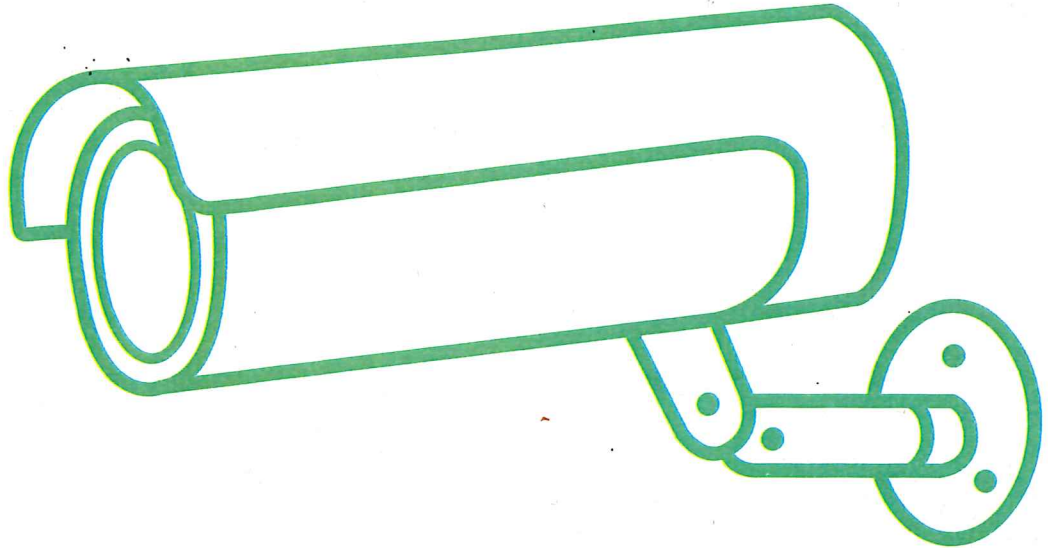
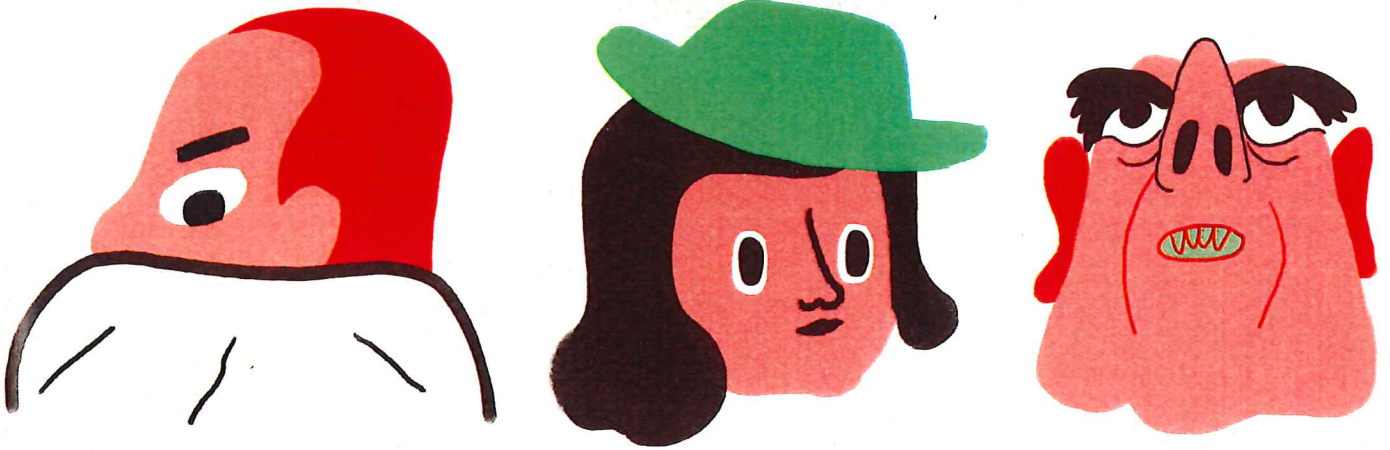


Illustration by Aida Novoa & Carlos Egan

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Then there is the problem of moral innumeracy. Coined by Joshua Greene, moral innumeracy suggests that there is decreasing value of a human life when we think about increasingly large groups of people. This explains why we give more weight to those who are nearby. It also explains why anecdotal stories of individuals are more persuasive than statistics. Large numbers of people are too abstract to get us to value them.

I think all of these 'barriers' find similarity in what I call 'social trolleyism'. The classic trolley problem, originally conceived by Philippa Foot in 1967, is a thought experiment in which you are tasked with pulling a lever to direct a runaway trolley (tram). If you pull it, the trolley will kill one person on the track. If you do not, it will kill five people on the track. It asks: "What is the most ethical thing to do?" Social trolleyism is the false idea that we are always tasked with pulling 'social valuing' levers that come at the cost of one group over the other.

Social trolleyism is based on three assumptions whose seeds are also found in normative judgements, partiality, and moral innumeracy. First, it is based on the assumption that valuing always involves opposing groups. In the case of the trolley problem it is one person versus five. In society, it is one ethnic group versus another. We

Social trolleyism is the false idea that we are always tasked with pulling 'social valuing' levers.

tend to think that people are in *competition* for our value and we can only give it to one group. While we may be limited in how we respond to people who we value, unlike partiality and racial habits, valuing all lives is never a contradiction or scarce resource, nor does it require the creation of a non-valued other.

The second assumption is connected to the first. There is the thought that valuing is always a dilemma and never an opportunity. Instead of an opportunity to respond morally to others, valuing is seen as a difficult choice with unfortunate consequences. Like the trolley problem, we think we have to pick and choose who to value and in doing so one group is destined to suffer in the end. However, valuing other lives doesn't require causalities. It is possible to affirm the humanity of others without disaffirming the humanity of members of other groups.

Lastly, social trolleyism arises from a lack of imagination. In the trolley problem, we do not know any information about those on the tracks. They are quite abstract. Similarly, what we see in moral innumeracy and racial habits is not only the failure to imagine ourselves in the shoes of others, but also the failure to imagine others as humans who may or may not be wearing any shoes at all. Social trolleyism becomes an excuse for a refusal to imagine a world in which all lives matter. We settle for abstraction instead.

In order to close the value gap and create a world in which all lives matter both in principle and in practice, it is not enough to hear protestors' calls or retweet their pleas. We should refuse to settle for defeat; we should tackle these barriers head on. Too many lives matter for us to just sit by pulling levers of value when we could be showing the world with value instead. ■

