

Why Death Today Has No Meaning

The most famous work of the German sociologist and philosopher Max Weber (1864-1920) is undoubtedly *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

But one of his most oft-quoted statements comes not from this book, but from an essay titled ["Science as a Vocation,"](#) in which he describes the modern world as "disenchanted":

"The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the 'disenchantment of the world.' Precisely the ultimate and most sublime values have retreated from public life either into the transcendental realm of mystic life or into the brotherliness of direct and personal human relations."

Most likely, the statement is so frequently referenced because it captures the experience of modern life for many today: a flattened world in which it's ever more difficult to sense the magical and the mystical. (I suppose this explains in part why so many people are attracted to shows such as *Game of Thrones*—they offer for our consumption a mysterious world that no longer corresponds to our modern world.)

But in this post, I mainly wanted to draw your attention to the paragraph immediately following Weber's introduction of the idea of "disenchantment." In it, he discusses the novelist Leo Tolstoy's belief that in a disenchanted world—one in which the religious and the mysterious has moved to the periphery—death no longer has any meaning.

Here's the paragraph:

"Now, this process of disenchantment, which has continued to

exist in Occidental culture for millennia, and, in general, this 'progress,' to which science belongs as a link and motive force, do they have any meanings that go beyond the purely practical and technical? You will find this question raised in the most principled form in the works of Leo Tolstoy. He came to raise the question in a peculiar way. All his broodings increasingly revolved around the problem of whether or not death is a meaningful phenomenon. And his answer was: **for civilized man death has no meaning.** It has none because the individual life of civilized man, placed into an infinite 'progress,' according to its own imminent meaning should never come to an end; for there is always a further step ahead of one who stands in the march of progress. And no man who comes to die stands upon the peak which lies in infinity. Abraham, or some peasant of the past, died 'old and satiated with life' because he stood in the organic cycle of life; because his life, in terms of its meaning and on the eve of his days, had given to him what life had to offer; because for him there remained no puzzles he might wish to solve; and therefore he could have had 'enough' of life. Whereas civilized man, placed in the midst of the continuous enrichment of culture by ideas, knowledge, and problems, may become 'tired of life' but not 'satiated with life.' He catches only the most minute part of what the life of the spirit brings forth ever anew, and what he seizes is always something provisional and not definitive, and therefore death for him is a meaningless occurrence. And because death is meaningless, civilized life as such is meaningless; by its very 'progressiveness' it gives death the imprint of meaninglessness. Throughout his late novels one meets with this thought as the keynote of the Tolstoyan art."

Earlier in the essay, Weber characterized science as seeking constant advances, and that in principle, this process can go on ad infinitum. This is what gives science meaning, and what provides meaning for a world largely colored by the scientific

worldview.

As Weber implies, man's life in a modern world is marked by his awareness and experience of these "advances"—the discovery of a new galaxy, the creation of a new vaccine, the arrival of the new iPhone. Through these markers, he receives constant reminders that he is part of a process, that he is a witness to the progress that gives meaning to modern life.

Death, however, brings a sudden end to one's part in this process. In the modern world, for many, death cannot help but bring with it a certain sense of incompleteness. When someone dies, there is a prevalent tendency to immediately think about how much more he could have done, how many more things he could have seen, and how many more experiences he could have had.

It's an interesting perspective that gives rise to an interesting question... In a disenchanted world dominated by a frantic push for unending progress, can one's life ever seem complete? Can death ever be meaningful?