

## **Part 1**

John Dickson:

You may be familiar with the famous 'Marshmallow test'. The experiment was conducted by a church in America for a sermon illustration. Their video is too cute. You have to watch it. Link in the show notes, and all that.

Anyway, in 1972, Stanford professor Walter Mischel conducted a study on delayed gratification and willpower. Children were given the option of eating one marshmallow now or getting a second marshmallow if they could wait 15 minutes without eating the first one.

Mischel found that the children who waited tended to be more self-reliant, more self-confident, less distractible and more able to cope with stress as adolescents. But he was quick to point out that the simplicity of the test could be misinterpreted (and the test certainly has its fair share of detractors).

"Your future is not in a marshmallow", Mischel said. If a child can't wait 15 minutes, it's not because there is something wrong with them. It might just mean that they didn't think it was worth waiting for.

In his 2014 book *The Marshmallow Test*, Mischel gave a more ... life and death example from his own experience. Fifty years ago, he was a three-pack-a-day smoker and he knew he needed to stop. But it wasn't until he saw a patient at Stanford Hospital being wheeled out on a gurney that he was able to quit. Mischel said he drew upon his vivid memory of that patient: he could picture the patient's shaved head and chest; the paint marks showing where the radiation should go to treat the metastasized lung cancer. When he was tempted to smoke, that image made the potential future consequences more immediate and much more powerful.

Mischel called this “pre-living a delayed outcome” - a kind of living the experience in the here and now in light of the future, not dismissing the future as unreal.

It’s a great example of something the Greek philosopher Plato taught, almost 2500 years ago: Knowing how to think about time - the past, the present, and the future - can *save your life*.

And that’s what we’re talking about in this episode.

How we think about time, and the value we give to the three parts of time (past, present, and future) really matters. Our special guest reckons it’s part of what makes for the good life.

**JD:** *I've got a really easy question to kick off - if you wouldn't mind, just defining time?*

Meghan Sullivan:

Oh, super easy. I don't think I have a satisfying definition is a typical philosophy move - it depends on what you mean, is that what our colleagues in nuclear physics measure at any particular time? Well, they're gonna have a really specialized definition. That's gonna be relevant to the kinds of questions and explanations that they're trying to offer. For philosophers, the kinds of questions about time and definitions that we tend to be interested in and seem to be well equipped with our methods to deal with: the past and the present and the future. What's the difference between the three of those? And is that all there is to time or are there other forms of time? Is the future open? Is the future a series of possibilities in the past fixed in some way? That's a question that conceptual analysis and also learning a little bit of psychology, but also debating with people about what their goals are when they think about time.

John Dickson:

That's Meghan Sullivan, Professor of Philosophy and Director of the Institute of Advanced Study at the University of Notre Dame (not Notre Dame) in Indiana—where Jed Bartlett went!!

She's written two books we'll be discussing today. The first is *Time Biases: A Theory of Rational Planning and Personal Persistence*, which she wrote in 2018 ... and her most recent book, published in 2022 with co-author Paul Blaschko.

Meghan is not only interested in how we think about time, but how we *live in* time. She teaches a hugely popular and influential undergraduate course at Notre Dame called *God and the Good Life* which dwells on these types of questions. Since 2016, the course has been taken by thousands of students. They're encouraged to uncover the deeper reasons for believing and doing what we do.

Meghan Sullivan:

I think another question about time that philosophers are well equipped to help us deal with is, how do we marry what we're learning about, how things change and move in the physical world? How does the weirdness that we've observed in the last 120 years of physics map onto what we claim to care about and to the kind of ways in a human dimension that we perceive time and organize our lives around it?

John Dickson:

If you asked a physicist, "What is time?", their answer would be very different, though complementary to the answer a philosopher would give. And either way, the answers are... well, LONG. Because, perhaps ironically, there *is* no brief explanation of time.

Here's the American theoretical physicist Sean Carroll:

**Excerpt: Sean Carroll - What is time?**

*Think about the planets in the solar system, moving around the sun. This is the kind of thing that physics is really good at. Paradigmatic: Kepler, Galileo, Newton. Those people. You're given the state of some physical system - in this case we mean the position of all the planets, where they're located in space and how they're moving, right? The velocity at just one moment of time. You don't need to be given the history, you just have where they are and how they're moving right now. And then you have a recipe -the laws of physics - you have Newton's laws of physics and Newton's laws of gravitation and from those, you can predict the future. From the present state of the system, you can tell where it's going to be next.*

*You can predict eclipses in the future, you can say where the planets are going to be. You can make an almanac. But there's something else that's very very important. You can also predict the past, or retrodict if you prefer. Given the current state of the system, the laws of physics tell you exactly what was going on in the entire past history of the system. And real astronomers actually do this, they extrapolate the current state of the solar system millions or billions of years into the past and the future.*

John Dickson:

I told you, right ... there's no short answer to the question 'what is time'. Stick with us, though, because there's a bit more that'll help us. This clip, by the way, is from an *hour-long* lecture Carroll did for the Long Now Foundation in 2021. Carroll is an outspoken atheist (such a waste of brilliance!). But he's one of the go-to physicists when thinking about time. We'll put a link to his lecture in the show notes.

**Excerpt - Sean Carroll (cont.)**

*So buried underneath that discussion is an idea that we call 'conservation of information'. All of the information you need about the system right now, its position, its velocity and so forth, suffices to predict the entire future and*

*past of the system. If I told you exactly the state of the system a million years ago you could predict exactly what it would be doing right now. This is the disappearance of the idea that time is flowing.*

*Time to a physicist, ever since Isaac Newton, it becomes kind of a label. There's this moment, there's the past moment, and there's the future moment. There's nothing special about what we call 'now' or the present moment. The laws of physics describe every moment of time as being on an equal footing, and the information contained in every moment of time persists into the past and the future. That's very different from what we're used to in our everyday lives.*

*For example, imagine there's a glass of water on the table ... it's a slightly cool glass of water, ok? And you ask yourself, 'what was the state of that glass of water a few minutes ago?' Maybe it was a cool glass of water just sitting there, but maybe it was a glass of room-temperature water with some ice cubes in it and maybe those ice cubes melted and cooled off the water. The point is, just given the macroscopic, observable information about the world, you can't say where it came from. Unlike the perfect information, we have for the solar system, with the water we can see a little bit about it, whether there's ice in it or not, but we're not looking at every atom or molecule of water. Then suddenly information is no longer conserved. There's information that used to be there in the system - did it have an ice cube in it or not? And that's disappeared over time.*

*We have an irreversible process. So what we're seeing in the macroscopic world is what scientists and philosophers call the 'arrow of time'. The difference between the past and the future and in particular, the asymmetry that we have when we think about now vs the past vs the future. And that asymmetry, that arrow of time, is not there in the fundamental laws of physics. We have to dig in a little bit to understand where it comes from...*

Meghan Sullivan:

The first decade or two of the 1900s' was critical for introducing all of these new distinctions about time. One is the idea of relativity that we get from Einstein. But another view that became really important comes to us from John McTaggart Ellis.

McTaggart was a Scottish philosopher and was so nice they named him McTaggart twice. But McTaggart coined this distinction between the A series and the B series of time, Very creative names, not that creative, he just didn't want to come up with creative names. So picked letters of the alphabet. The A series of time is the concept of time that we have that divides all of time into the difference between the past and the present and the future.

And if you're thinking in an A-series mode about time, you're thinking, 'well, now we're presently having this conversation a little bit later today, I'm gonna eat a delicious burrito for dinner and this morning I ate delicious pancakes for breakfast'. It's thinking in an A series way; past present future.

But that's not the only way we can think about time. In fact, we can think about time and the way it's governing our lives and our reasoning using relations between events and moments in time that don't identify a past present or future. And this is what McTaggart calls the B series of time. So the B series of time is all of our time concepts arranged in terms of earlier or later than. So I can say, 'eating pancakes was earlier than my discussion with John, but my discussion with John was before eating a burrito. But I managed to describe all of that without telling you which event is happening presently.

A big debate that has raged again for the last 118 or so years - I mean, Taggart's writing around the same time as Einstein - is whether or not one of these concepts of time past present future or earlier later than is more fundamental or more real. And this gets into this question about like, is the present in fact, like a part of reality or is it just something that I project into reality?

John Dickson:

In Einstein's theory of relativity, time is woven together with the three dimensions of space, forming a kind of bendy, four-dimensional space-time continuum. It's what is called the "block universe", encompassing the entire past, present and future. Einstein's equations suggest that everything in the block universe has been decided from the beginning. The initial conditions of the cosmos determine what comes later. There are no surprises. Just weeks before his death in 1955, Einstein wrote: "For us believing physicists, the distinction between past, present and future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion."

This theory - which is along the lines of the 'b' theory Meghan's talking about, is still very popular with physicists today. But nothing is settled. As Sean Carroll said in that earlier clip, and Meghan foreshadows, if you dig deeper, there are aspects of our *lived reality* that just don't quite fit with a block universe theory of time.

This idea of whether the time is, in fact, an illusion is in no way a new one. The 6th Century BC Greek philosopher Heraclitus argued that the primary feature of the universe is that it is always changing. His contemporary, Parmenides, countered by saying there was no such thing as change - sounding a bit like an ancient Einstein. What we think of as change, Parmenides said, was really just part of the permanent cycle of the universe. As Sean Carroll puts it, Parmenides argued that the universe is the set of all moments at once.

Director Mark tells me it's a bit like what the alien Tralfamadorians believe in Kurt Vonnegut's masterful novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five*: (*Producer Kaley assures me the novel is masterful*).

***Excerpt: Slaughterhouse-Five***

*"I am a Tralfamadorian, seeing all time as you might see a stretch of the Rocky Mountains. All time is all time. It does not change. It does not lend itself to warnings or explanations. It simply is."*

John Dickson:

But Meghan would call herself an 'a-theorist' - preferring the idea that there *is* an objective difference between the past, the present, and the future.

Meghan Sullivan:

I'm an A-theorist. Now I asked, like, do I have a great argument for how we're going to get the present back in a general relativistic framework in physics? No, absolutely not. I defer to my colleagues in physics for that, but I think as a working hypothesis for developing really interesting philosophical theories about time, all of the really interesting theories take it as an assumption or a positive or an axiom, that there's a difference, an objective difference in reality, between past and the present, and the future.

My job as a philosopher is let's take that assumption, and try to understand really clearly what we mean by it. And then how would that assumption affect many different arguments that we might give for what it means to care about the future, for what it means for objects to undergo change for what it is for something or someone to be the same over time, and I'm very interested in, in the kind of philosophical arguments and theories we get, if we take the A theory for granted and then try to build a huge system out of it.

What are all of the things that we could possibly mean by the present? Does it mean all events happening simultaneously? Does it mean like that all of the objects have their properties for real versus like shadows of their properties? This is a theory that philosophers have been interested in lately. Does being present mean something else entirely? Philosophers can generate all of those different options, and if they're particularly interested, then hopefully they'll inform some of the theories that then physicists go and test because physicists measure time and change all the time as part of their work.

***Excerpt: Wayne's World***

*"Stop torturing yourself, dude. You'll never afford it. Live in the Now!"*



John Dickson:

30 years ago, the cult hit Wayne's World gave Generation X its mantra: "live in the now!"

The quest to 'live in the moment' is a strong one.

But psychologist Marc Wittmann says that the duration of 'felt experience' - 'the moment' that you recognise as the moment - is between two and three seconds.

And in the physical world, physics may have no need for the present.

Meghan argues that we shouldn't *prefer* the present - whatever that 'present' might look like. But nor should we prefer the future or the past.

**JD:** *You, you argue for, am I putting this correctly, a kind of neutral position toward the past present and the future? I mean, when, when I read your ideas, it really stopped me in my tracks. My fear, of course, is that I haven't really understood it. You don't want to be biased toward the present, the future or the past. So tell me, what does it mean to be neutral about these three dimensions of time?*

**MS:** So John let's assume we'll, we'll take, take for granted some, theoretic assumptions. One of the things people find most shocking about my book is that I'm an, A theorist who believes or assumes that the past, present and future are real and then goes on to argue they're real and you shouldn't care. So we're here right now and discussing what events make our lives good or bad, and what's worth your attention, caring and planning. A natural assumption and the way most of us in fact live our lives is we care a whole lot more about stuff that's gonna happen in the nearby future than we care about things that are gonna happen to us a really long time from now or things that have already happened to us, especially if we don't have any current trauma from the things that have already happened to us, they're over and they're, they're done with, we're not currently suffering from them.

So an example, I've gotta go to the dentist next week. This is a true story. Every time I go, I take a picture in the dental office too, to use an example in class, but I gotta go to the dentist next week. He's gonna tell me I have cavities, cos I don't floss. I lie to him about flossing, but he knows really quickly that I don't, I'm dreading this trip to the dental office because it's gonna mean pretty soon after I'm gonna have to get a cavity filled. If my dentist calls me later today and says, 'Meghan, I'm really sorry. There's been a scheduling error. I'm not able to get you in until May'. I'm gonna feel relieved. I'm gonna be so happy that this event of painful dental fillings has now been pushed further into my future, but that's crazy. I'm still gonna have to do it like I have to get these cavities filled.

It's not the case that I have in any way made my teeth healthier as a result of that concern. And I realized that I should want the procedure to just be over with in whatever way is as pain-minimizing as possible.

But I also have this irrational, emotional tendency to just worry a lot more about painful things that are gonna happen next week and a lot less about things in the distant future. That's a kind of near bias and it's one that philosophers, since Plato's *Protagoras* have been trying to talk them out of. Plato tells us one of the best things that you can do for your children in the *Protagoras* is to convince them, help them learn, to see the proper value of pains and pleasures and other goods that are scheduled really far away. So that they'll make good trade-offs so they won't settle for the first marshmallow. They'll wait a while to get the second one.

John Dickson:

*The Protagoras*, by the way, is a dialogue written by Plato in the early 4th century BC, imagining a discussion between Socrates (his mentor) and the famous Greek thinker Protagoras (whose ideas he did not like).

Meghan Sullivan:

So far. So good. We know that we tend to care more about events when they're nearby and less about them when they're further away. But we also think we should get rid of that bias as much as we're as possible to do

another kind of temporal bias is one that philosophers have agonized about and psychologists and economists have had less to say on over the years though, that's changing. And this is what we might call our bias towards the present and future or our bias against the past.

So I have had to have cavities filled before John, as you might imagine. And it just refused to change my ways. Three years ago I had to get a deep filling replaced. That was a pretty painful event. And now it's over. I'm not scared. It wasn't trauma.

It didn't build my character or change who I was fundamentally as a woman. It was just a painful event that happened for an hour in my life three years ago.

Should I still have any preferences about that? Like should I say, gosh, I wish that the filling I need to get next week happened three years ago instead, is that a rational preference? You might think, 'of course, it is - all reasonable people wish bad stuff was in their past and good stuff was in their present and future'. The arguments that I want to give in the book are: 'not so fast! If you follow the reasoning for not wanting to delay your pains, some logically similar forms of arguments and some similar principles about rationality can convince you to think that you should be indifferent about whether or not good events have happened in your past or your future relative to where you are in time.

Now, this is puzzling for a lot of different reasons. One thing that's puzzling about it is a lot of philosophers have just assumed. And this goes back to Aristotle that rationality can only guide you in making good decisions based on your preferences on forming good plans and taking action as with respect to those plans and the past there's nothing you can do to affect the past - there's no way to plan for your past. I can't say, 'oh gosh, I'm gonna, I'm gonna pay my dentist some money to make it the case that this filling I need to get next week instead, already happened'. It just doesn't work that way.

John Dickson:

I just have to chime in here and say: Aren't philosophers amazing!!?? The stuff they think, professionally, might seem arcane and irrelevant, but when I hear Megan talk like this, I'm sitting there thinking: Philosophy is probing stuff that is so right in front of our nose - so basic to our existence - that we usually don't see it, don't think about it ... but we should. I really regret only doing a couple of philosophy units at college. And I'm the worse for it. Anyway, back to Professor Sullivan ...

Meghan Sullivan:

You can't change the past. So why think that there are ways to be more or less rational about thinking about whether events have already passed or not? One of the things I try to show in the book is it's more complicated than that because we're the kinds of planning creatures that are oftentimes not only thinking about how to satisfy our present needs but also thinking about the future, how we're gonna evaluate the plans that we've made and acted on.

Now we have these kinds of time loops and extended ways of reasoning about time that are really important to how we live our lives. And in fact...

**JD:** *We're thinking about the "future past"*

**MS:** Thinking about the future past, thinking about whether you will regret the decisions that you made at a certain point. And that can be that kind of mental time travel is a really important part of what it is for creatures like us to lead good lives. But once we add that into the mix, we realize that if we're just gonna blindly not care about our past or try to make ourselves into the creatures that are ignorant of our past or don't, uh, don't continue to let our past decisions have value in our preferences, then we're gonna make all kinds of bad decisions.

**JD:** *Plato said something like this, this kind of thinking, knowing how to think about the future in the past and yeah can save our lives. Yes. Okay. How? Save my Meghan!*

**MS:** That passage comes from *The Protagoras*, which is Socrates, giving people dialogue among other, among other things about to learn self-control and why self-control is an important part of the good life.

And one of the points that Plato wants to make is, you know, animals have their instincts and fur and teeth and all of these biological advantages to keep their lives going. Even though, you know, in retrospect, we might see a lot of their lives as being short and miserable. Humans don't even have those natural advantages. We don't have fur or sharp teeth. All we have is our wits.

So one of the things that we have to actively do is think in order to preserve our lives and also have better lives, have good lives, and make sure we're aiming at the kinds of goals that are worth aiming at.

And that requires thinking about more than just the emotions you're experiencing and the physical sensations that you're having in the present moment. But thinking about the fact that you are in the middle of a life where you have goals that are on that distant hillside Plato talks about trying to measure the height of a man on a distant hillside.

One thing appreciating time and rationality might do is just stop you from accidentally making a kind of decision that will prematurely end your life. So, you know, you might think to take a modern example, somebody who persists in smoking right now, even though they know it increases dramatically, their risk for developing cancer and living a shorter and less healthy life. But if that person says 'just right now, I crave the cigarette and damn the future, I'm not gonna pay attention to it', that person's near bias very well could end their life. In less significant cases.

A lot of us know that we need to make some sacrifices right now to enable ourselves to have lives that we're aiming at down the road. I know I need to be putting more money in my retirement account this year. I know that I need to make investments in difficult relationships in order to have those people in my life down the road and be able to appreciate those plans and those values that are some that are like emotions that don't always detect

at the moment, but reason can help us see, might make our lives significantly better and enhance them in really important ways. And Plato certainly understood that. He thought one of the goals of philosophy was to try to teach people how to see those values that might be missing when they're really far off temporally or when they're just kind of complicated and require you to think about it. The kinds of values that we know are there, but our present emotions might not be picking up on them.

John Dickson:

OK, so what about God and time?

If it's best for us to be temporally neutral, what is God's experience of time?

Meghan Sullivan:

Well, it's tough. Again, if you're in a Christian tradition, you believe that God is a Trinity and that in the person of Jesus, he did experience time. He was in time, such an important we're just celebrated Christmas in the advent season where we really try to contemplate this mystery of like 'Holy cow! He was part of space and time and embodied part of material reality. What could that possibly mean for God to be that, but also transcend that, you know?

What we appreciate as valuable in our lives, we assume has a kind of temporal and narrative structure. I'm in the middle of my life right now. Hopefully like in the early middle - I remember the ways that I developed as a child in the ways I was cared for as a child. And I have an idea of what the future in this world is gonna hold for me. And I have things that I hope in the life to come. That's a really important part of Christian tradition is imagining your life as having this narrative structure, a structure that God himself participated in and made sacred, but also a structure that's like full of suffering that's somehow gonna get balanced out in the distant future, but it's not gonna be this future. It's gonna be a separate timeline.

You can't help but wonder about these questions. And you have to think that God appreciates and understands that structure because it's so

important that God himself wanted to participate in it in a way, but also he's God, he's omnipotent. He's morally perfect. he knows everything. He perceives all the space and time. So he is definitely not experiencing it in that way. Because then he'd have all my temporal limitations.

John Dickson:

So, is the Christian God an A-Theory God or a B-Theory God? Does it even make sense to have an a-theory God or a B-theory God? This, says Meghan, is one of the biggest debates in the philosophy of religion.

Some theologians and philosophers have argued for a kind of a-temporal God - God is *timeless*. Whatever our time is, God is independent of it. He exists outside of time. This view of God might work with a 'block universe' or b-theory view of time, but God is still kind of hovering over the block universe and can see everything spread out, beginning to end.

An A-Theory view of God would have God *in time*, experiencing time. God can still be *eternal* in this view, but he is also temporal - his dealings occur at particular times, like the rest of us. It's just that God is there through all the particular points of time.

St Augustine (yes, him again) held that time was created when the world was created. God is eternal, in the sense of being timeless. For God, there is no before and after, but only an eternal present. All time - past, present, and future - is present to Him at once. God stands outside the stream of time.

*"There can be no time without creation,"* wrote Augustine in book XI of his *Confessions*.

*"You [Lord], made that very time, and no time could pass by before you made those times. But if there was no time before heaven and earth, why do they ask what you did 'then'? There was no 'then', where there was no time."*

Augustine was praised by a famed British mathematician, philosopher and logician Bertrand Russell (who was no friend of religion) in his epic 'History of Western Philosophy'. Russell complimented Augustine as having a "very admirable relativistic theory of time."

Fifteen centuries after Augustine's death, Einstein's theory of relativity and the insight of modern physics seem to agree with Augustine's view on time. Augustine began with the idea that time is something *created*. Modern physics holds that time (or space-time) is something *physical*. Just as, for Augustine, it makes no sense to ask what God was doing before the creation of the world, so in physics, it makes no sense to ask what was happening 20 billion years ago if we have determined that the universe is 13.8 billion years old. It's not that there was nothing. It is that there is no such thing as the time before the Big Bang.

In his book *Foundation of Modern Physics*, Physics Nobel laureate Steven Weinberg wrote that "Book XI of Augustine's Confessions contains a famous discussion of the nature of time, and it seems to have become a tradition to quote from this chapter in writing about quantum cosmology." Augustine is everywhere!!

But then... if God is timeless and eternal, how can he also be personal? The American philosopher and theologian William Lane Craig argues for a kind of third way for God and time. Yes, God is timeless but he enters our temporal existence to relate to us.

We'll put notes on all of these different theories in the show notes.

The point is: this stuff about God and time is *all* speculative. It was speculative in Augustine's time, and it is now. There is so much about time (and God!) that we just don't understand.

**JD:** *To take a different theological tack then, a lot of 20th-century theologians like Wolf Panenbourg and Jurgen Moltmann and the great Miroslav Volf at Yale are extremely futurist ... they describe them as having*



*a theology of hope. Eschatology is fundamental. And so, as I read your work, I was wondering what you think of them, but by which I really mean is Christianity a bit too eschatological for you because it's so committed to the resurrection of the body and the life of the world to come?*

**MS:** I do think it's a mistake for individual Christians to think that their attention and their hopes and desires should be really circumscribed by the present and the future for their lives and for this world and not pay attention to the past. The reason for that is that some of our deepest sources of meaning that God has made available to us are wonderfully already in our past. I mean, some of it's in our future as well, but in our past - what is that? Well, holy cow, the Old and New Testaments. These really incredibly important, uh, histories of people who God has chosen to interact with in really direct and miraculous ways and reveal things to, in ways that have shaped their lives and given us a blueprint for how we are gonna live and strive.

It's really important for Catholics, for instance, when you're going through a period of intense suffering - and I know a lot of people who've gone through a great deal of suffering in the last two years - to not just be able to think, 'well, God's got a plan he's gonna make it better'. I mean, you should think that he does have a plan and it's gonna get better probably in a weird way that you don't totally anticipate. But it's also extraordinarily helpful to think God understands suffering because, and then looking to the past about all the different ways that humans, other than me have suffered, and the fact that I'm not totally alone in my suffering and trying to understand why that happened. And how important it is to not just acknowledge that that's a, like a fact that you wanna put into your theology, but to dwell on it, to care about it, to think about it, to like enter into it, to go into the grave with him, and to not treat those as kind of just like metaphors or just the weird parts of scripture that we hear on Sundays and try to forget. But instead thinking, looking to the events that have already happened in the human story, and that are part of a common past, not just mine, but one that I share with everybody who's suffered, uh, can help me find meaning right now before I even know how it's gonna get fixed in the end. And I think a lot of us need

that. We need all the options we can get for making meaning outta these messed up lives we've got.

### **Five Minute Jesus**

John\_Dickson:

My interview with Megan Sullivan has really stayed with me ... I often find myself pondering the value of being neutral about the three points of time, the past, the present, and the future.

Maybe neutral isn't the right word; I don't mean to suggest we don't care. Perhaps we should think about properly valuing all three points of time.

One of the things Megan said that we couldn't include for time's sake (ironically), is about the passing of time and human cultures.

We think about a lost culture like, say, the ancient Mesopotamians, or the original Celts ( by the way, we should do an episode on the Celts) ... Anyway, we ponder these now-extinct cultures and we think of it as a tragedy.

But is it?

Aren't we just biasing the present when we say that - our particular present? Is that any more logical than

lamenting some future culture that hasn't come into existence yet?

If we choose to value the past, as the past, we need not lament everything that is extinct. We can value that culture as a precious point in the continuum of time. It has not lost its value simply because it is no longer present for us to observe. We can rejoice in lost cultures, just as we might enjoy any particular present culture.

And learning about them, we can draw lessons for our present and future – knowing that our culture, too, will disappear into the sands of time.

Anyway, all of that got me thinking about the way Jesus spoke of the past, the present, and the future. I don't want to turn Jesus into the ultimate time philosopher, but as you read the gospels, and the 1st century biographies of his life, it's clear he frequently held up all three points of time as worthy of our consideration.

First, he regularly points people back to the traditions of the past, in particular to God's prior actions ... in Saving Israel out of Egypt [ the Passover ], giving of the 10 commandments, and the words of the prophets, whose power is precisely that they spoke in the distant past with ongoing relevance. The modern preference for things that are new, and contemporary, at this moment, is perhaps one of our culture's blindspots, and I think it's to our detriment.

Then again, there are times when Jesus tells people to think about the present and not fret about the future. The classic text is in Matt 6 (Sermon on the Mount):

*“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself.”*

This part of Jesus' teaching is obviously a corrective to the hoarders among us, those who pour their lives into future accumulation. Jesus calls us to live in the present, without an excessive devotion to the future, without the delayed gratification that obsesses about future riches and comforts!!

But there's also obviously a third aspect to Jesus' approach to time. The future really does matter, he said. He constantly talked about the future Kingdom of God. He taught his disciples to pray “your Kingdom come”, a

plea for God's promised future to arrive and make all things well. He told parable after parable about waiting. Like this one from Luke 12:

*“Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning,<sup>36</sup> like servants waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet, so that when he comes and knocks they can immediately open the door for him.<sup>37</sup> It will be good for those servants whose master finds them watching when he comes. Truly I tell you, he will dress himself to serve, will have them recline at the table and will come and wait on them.<sup>38</sup> It will be good for those servants whose master finds them ready, even if he comes in the middle of the night or toward daybreak.”*

This is one of the key teachings of the NT: a Christian seeks to orient life now around the future arrival of Christ and his kingdom.

Christians believe justice will one day reign forever, so they get busy with justice now. They believe that love will triumph over all things, so they commit to the way of love now, in anticipation of that future. And so on. They are ready for their Master's arrival.

My point is: Christians are sometimes wrongly criticised ... as either stuck in the past or so fixated on the future they're of no earthly use and all that.

The truth is: Jesus called people to rightly value all three points of time.

Yes, we are to value the past, the ancient traditions. We shouldn't be so smug as to think that every good idea was thought up in our day.

Yes, we are to value the present, not letting go of the responsibilities right in front of us because we're desperate to accumulate some imagined future.

And, yes, we are to value the future. There will come a day, Jesus taught, when God will overthrow all that is opposed to his ways and he will establish his justice and love as the fundamental, eternal values. Living now for that future is just ... rational!

You can press play now.

## **Part 2**

In the hugely successful Disney movie *Frozen II*, (a current favourite in Producer Kaley's household) we have everyone's most-loved character, Olaf - a snowman - wrestle with the burden of getting older and having the Disney version of an existential crisis.

It's a kind of cute way of heading into the not-that-cute territory. All this talk of time can make us feel fairly small and perhaps even ... meaningless.

**JD:** *I wanna move to the good life. My segue there is kind of depressing. There are some people who, you know, because the past is gone, they don't have much hope for the future because the past is gone. Everything is meaningless, like it's all illusion, because every moment, even the beginning of this interview is gone. And so, you know, civilizations are gone. friendships are gone, and I'll soon be gone ... get me out of this depressive hole!*

**MS:** First philosopher move. We gotta make sure we understand what we're talking about when we talk about nihilism, there's this philosophical theory that there's just no meaning in human lives to be had at all. It's just an objective fact, whatever you think of is meaningful, either it's incoherent or there's no way that any of our lives could ever do the thing that would make it meaningful, maybe because our lives are so finite or because we're unable to store up value in the way that you just described ... that's one kind of nihilism. I think philosophy majors and theologians about that kind of nihilism, but it's not the kind that like maybe people dwell a lot of people dwell on day to day.

There's another kind of nihilism that I think a lot of people think about, I certainly read about it in the newspaper all the time, and this is the idea that, for my particular kind of life, the way I'm living it, the goals that I've set for myself, they are meaningless. Or like I personally, Megan Sullivan, John Dixon, and Barack Obama am not gonna be able to have a meaningful life.

Why is that? Because it may be bad decisions that I've made, or because of relationships that I have and things that are more local to your particular scenario, but feel crippling.

I don't know how to set any new goals or how to think about my life in such a way that I could find it meaningful again. That's a very real problem and that's a philosophical problem. I mean, it might be a problem that you start to get counselling and help for, but you also need to wrestle with this idea of what exactly are the areas of my life where I'm pegging meaning this philosophical idea to them? And, is the meaning really there?

For again, 2,400 years, philosophers have been saying, 'don't ignore that question. Don't think that, that question is very easy to answer'. Of course, the nihilists think like 'give up like abandoned hope while ye who enter here'. Most philosophers have said, 'no, no, no, don't give up yet either. It's just, this is gonna be hard, but we're gonna get through it. We might not understand all of it in our lifetime, but I can help you understand more of it if you're willing to go along and study and think about these questions than you would just operate under your own steam'.

I think temporal neutrality which, remember again, is just being able to care equally about the past and the present in the future - I think it can help in at least two ways. It's not gonna go the whole way, because its not temporal neutrality won't answer the question of what's ultimately valuable or meaningful. You're gonna need other parts of philosophy to do that. But it can tell you places to look that you might not be looking. One way temporal neutrality can help is temporal neutrality says to consider your future and really distant future to be as important as your nearby future and your present. And that can be liberating if you're going through a horrible event, like a pandemic where all of your present and nearby plans, just keep getting cancelled. All of the things that you think are gonna make your life meaningful keep getting ripped away.

Temporal neutrality says that's okay. There's a whole goal post a whole realm of meaning and opportunities that are outside of the nearby present that is still gonna be you and that's gonna be your life and there's gonna be

good things ahead there. What are they gonna be? Well, they might also, they might be virtues or they might be achievements. They might be the kinds of things that you need to work for over a long period of time and you're not gonna get that value right away but that doesn't mean that it's not there. Temporal neutrality by helping you to see further down the road - This is Plato's idea - is also gonna help you realize that there are men on that hill. There are values out there. They're far away from me right now and my emotions might not be picking them up, but they're there if I'm willing to go after them. And there's something there that's left to hope for.

The second way temporal neutrality can help. And this leads to, you know, one of the hardest, good life problems as we approach the end of life. I've got some friends from college who are my age, I'm 39. And the wife of, my friend, has been diagnosed with a really serious form of terminal cancer. And they've been going through all of the treatments and been wrestling with this for a year now, but she is facing this really bleak, very real possibility that there's not a great deal of future in this particular life that's open to her. That's a really tragic, very difficult situation and one that she's dealing with really viscerally right now, but we're all gonna deal with it at some point in our lives.

Being able to see value in our past and reflect on the meaning of the life that we've already lived, and if you're the kind of person who's able as Seneca says to kind of turn your gaze around, to be able to look, instead of the dark future ahead, back behind you in the tunnel where they're still light, you can find sources of meaning and value that might not feel available to you if you're really time biased. That's a skill and not everybody, you know, could, you know, it's a skill to also find those valuable moments in your past. There might be a lot of trauma or horrible things in your past, but being able to fixate on that and understand the value that you have already stored in your life and having a theory of what's valuable and what you want and your desires that enables the past to hold it - that can be a thing really helpful for folks who are attuned to reality and know that they don't have a lot of future left. And this is this, isn't an original insight for me. You find Seneca and many of the stoic philosophers in ancient Rome are

advocating temporal neutrality for exactly this reason, Lucretius, an epicurean philosopher, thought 'we have to develop this human capacity to appreciate the past' because otherwise this drive, we have to find our lives meaningful is not gonna be satisfied because the future is eventually gonna leave us short'.

John Dickson:

Meghan believes that fighting against our time biases will make us more rational and, ultimately, happier.

She's not just interested in how we perceive time, but how that perception plays out as we live *in* time.

So I asked her: how should we live, then? What makes a good life?

Meghan Sullivan:

I'm totally hooked on Aristotle. There's a lot that Aristotle got wrong. He didn't know how many teeth women had and had some really retrograde, dumb views about slavery. But you know, a broken clock is still right a couple of times a day.

Aristotle talks about the good life as a state that we achieve when the distinctively human functions that we have are hopefully realized. What are distinctive human functions? Reason, virtue and virtue. Not in the, like the prim 1800s, Victorian England sense of virtue, but courage and generosity, friendship, these kinds of habits that we cultivate intentionally and then hopefully don't have to think about that very much to start to do naturally. When we've gotten to that point in our lives, that's a good life is to be in that like state where you've achieved those things and they're all functioning and firing on all cylinders.

John Dickson:

Aristotle, whom we've mentioned once or twice on this show, was the great Greek philosopher - student of Plato who was the student of Socrates. 350



years before Jesus he set out his view of the 'good life' or eudaimonia in *The Nicomachean Ethics*, his best-known work on ethics.

Meghan Sullivan:

Some of that is about feeling good. It's about feeling pleasure. It's about having the right kinds of emotions, but they're not just happy emotions. A generous and courageous person might experience proper amounts of fear might experience as empathy. A really good friend is gonna actually experience some negative feelings because being a good friend means taking on the suffering of other people. But having things attuned in the right way and knowing, and being aware that you're at that point, that's what we're all aiming for. It's the kind of thing that we achieve, hopefully over the course of a life.

I think Aristotle, the way he's often taught in the way we might read him in a historical context, probably had a bit of a narrow view of what the function of a human could be. Something that was heavily identified with what, like a really great noble Greek guy would be, or Macedonian would be. We should ditch that exemplar that he had in his mind, but think that there are virtues and habits that are distinctively human and wonderful about our lives and what we should be aiming at is trying to like grow and develop those together over the course of our lives in a way that is gonna make these lives meaningful.

**JD:** *It assumes there is a nature, like human nature, right?*

**MS:** Everyone's so sceptical about human nature!

John Dickson:

We won't be going into this whole debate about human nature, not in this episode anyway. But if you're in any way engaged with the culture today it should come as no surprise that the idea that humans have anything like 'fundamental dispositions' or 'traits' is controversial. Apart from the central question of whether humans are naturally selfish and competitive (as argued by Hobbes and Locke, for example) or naturally social and altruistic

(as argued by Marx or Durkheim), there is now the broader question of whether anything is natural or just the result of some form of learning or socialisation.

But that's really for another time... For now, we're going with Aristotle.

Meghan Sullivan:

Some of the stuff philosophers say about human nature is garbage and you should obviously be like a little bit nervous anytime somebody tells you something really weird about who you really are, that doesn't seem to resonate. I get that, but we wonder all the time about whether or not there are better and worse ways to live our lives. Like it's new year's right now, while we're taping this interview, every opinion piece in the major newspapers in the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and *The Washington Post* this week is about like, 'here's a better way to diet this year. Here's a better way to be a parent this year. Here's a better way to worry less about dieting and parenting this year'.

We're always seeking advice. And that's presumably because we think that there are some dimensions on which we can improve, we wanna know about it. We're really deeply concerned about this, and that is like believing that you have a nature is believing, like there's a thing, an activity - parenting, and you can do better or worse at it, and you wanna be the kind, a person that does better. How are you gonna do it? That's what it means to believe that you have nature. And I think we all, everybody, at least that seeks out advice and formulates plans is implicitly granting that they have something that some dimension on which they can improve. But you already have this like the implicit idea of your nature. And it's what ever thing causes you to click on that advice column.

John Dickson:

As we mentioned earlier, Meghan's course 'God and the Good Life' is the most popular course at Notre Dame. She tells me that if you're concerned about what it means to live a 'good life', then questions about God are inevitable.

Meghan Sullivan:

So we teach at a Catholic school where obviously a lot of our students come here wanting to talk about the God question, not already having figured it out in their minds, but thinking like, 'dammit, I'm paying \$60,000 a year and I'm gonna start asking some questions'. That definitely has affected my colleague, Paul and I's approach to how we wanna teach people about philosophy and the good life.

The way I approach the God questions, especially knowing that the students that I most want to talk to about these good life questions come from a variety of religious backgrounds or no religious backgrounds - some of them are international students, students from China who have not really even been exposed to Christianity before - and the question about like is the Trinity real is not the thing that's keeping them up at night. It's realizing that people are coming from lots of different standpoint, but in the process of asking these questions about what's really valuable in my life and how do I understand my life and the context of the world, you start to get into God questions, a couple clicks down the road.

We try to show this to our students and the book follows the structure first saying, 'okay, how does a good person manage their money, and make financial trade offs?'. Then that gets you into questions like 'how does a good person develop love and understand what it is to really love another person versus only to superficially love or to use another person and like well loving things? What does it mean when somebody says that they love something more than just the other people that they're in a relationship with, but maybe love like the universe as a whole or love their whole life, even the bad parts of it?'. That almost always gets you into questions that figures like Aquinas in St. Anselm and Augustine we're really concerned with, is a lot of people find once they start travelling down the road, trying to think like, what does love really mean in my life? They're gonna face this question of like, could there be objective love in the universe? Is there a perfect example of love? That's gonna get you into debates about religion.

It's probably not ... and we spend some time in the book talking about this ... It's not gonna convince you to join a church. I mean, maybe it will. I know a couple of people in philosophies get pulled in, but usually, that's not how it works. Instead, you learn that you can seek after these questions and wonder about them and that there are better and worse ways that you could think about them. And that opens up a bunch of options for you to think about the life that you're gonna build for yourself and the sources of meaning that you're gonna tap into. And that's what philosophy's really good at like pointing out these options, the consequences of picking them.

John Dickson:

In 1896, William James gave one of the most important lectures in the history of the philosophy of religion. It was called 'The Will to Believe'.

James eventually became known as the father of modern psychology. But he was also one of the 19th century's fiercest defenders of the rationality of religious conviction.

In the lecture, James argued that cultivating religious belief - with all of its complexity and all of its risk - can be a crucial part of the good life.

James believed that there are many decisions over the course of our lives where we've got to decide whether or not to have courage in what we can't know for sure, and take a leap of faith. He wanted to show that there are times when it is *rational* to believe without sufficient evidence.

James' views were challenged by prominent British atheist William Clifford, who argued against the leap of faith saying "it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence."

But James countered that there are responsible and irresponsible leaps of faith. He offered three criteria to distinguish between the two. In order for a leap of faith to be rational it must be:

- “Forced” - that is, imposed upon us by some external set of circumstances.
- “Momentous” - that is, have important consequences for your life; and
- “Live” - that is, something you could actually envision living out in your everyday life.

**JD:** *So explain it to us - this idea of liturgically forcing yourself to think a certain thought or act a certain way?*

**MS:** Just thinking ‘I’ve got some live options before me’. I feel like this is true of a lot of my Western-based college students. They come to us and they’re just not really sure about the religion thing. They might think ‘look, I could see a way my life going from here on out where I’m a practising Catholic. I could see another way my life goes where I’m an atheist. I don’t really see a live option where I worship the flying spaghetti monster’, or ‘I don’t really see a live option where I convert to Islam because I don’t know anything about Islam. I’ve got no personal connections at all with that religious tradition. That’s a closed option, but these other two are live options. And I’m not sure which way to go’.

William James, one of his many profound geniuses or contributions to philosophy is saying, ‘yeah, that’s part of human nature too, is realizing that we will find ourselves in situations where there are weighty consequences to what we believe it’s gonna change your life entirely if you decide to start moving down the devout Catholic road versus moving down the serious atheist road, it’s gonna change what you do on Sundays at a minimum’.

There are profound consequences for how we live our lives based on those decisions. Sometimes the new evidence is not coming in for what’s the right, you know, hypothesis about the world. And so you’ve got to take responsibility for making a guess and also realizing that, uh, it matters how you tend your beliefs the same way it matters what other kinds of risks you’re willing to take in pursuit of the good life and James understood that I think really viscerally.

**JD:** *I mean, when I read that section of your book, I thought - maybe it's just a fanciful thought that - you know, what would happen if an atheist or someone who thought sort of themselves as an atheist decided to sort of live Christian liturgical traditions for let's just say six weeks. Six weeks of saying 'Our Father' and reading a passage of scripture and meditating on God, even if they don't believe it, they just do it and see what happens ... I wonder what would happen?*

**MS:** There's this trend of books in the US - 'The year of living biblically'.

**JD:** *I don't really mean that!*

**MS:** That's the wrong way to do it! Nobody just wakes up one day and decides I'm a full-blown Roman Catholic. I'm a convert to Catholicism. That was not, that was not how it worked for me. Often you get drawn in by habits and practices.

Aristotle says, yeah, that's all to the good. This is how we think about the good life by trying out habits, and trying to put ourselves in community and trying to develop -

**JD:** *And we're already habituated by a million things. Why not contemplate what things are better?*

**MS:** I think one mistake Christians often make in dialogue with atheists is by trying to start just with the metaphysical arguments, like 'there has, has to be a designer if they're the scientific laws look this way'. I mean, again, that's interesting. A lot of people don't find themselves embracing religious ways of life as a result of those arguments.

One thing that I will recommend to folks if they just want to understand me or my Catholicism a little bit better is to think about something like the Examen Prayer in the Jesuit tradition. So you can try the Examen in prayer and be really uncertain about whether God exists. You can still decide like 'look at the end of every day for six weeks I just want to think about how my day looked from my perspective and what I thought were the areas of my life that day that I need forgiveness for; what are the areas of life where I

felt there was like surprising grace, how would this look from the standpoint of the universe? If there was a God, how would that be perceived the day that I had? And how is that gonna shape my intentions for the next day? It's a kind of simple prayer practice, but one that's been extremely robust in the Christian tradition, at least ever since St Ignatius. If you really wanna understand what's going on in the operating system for a Christian, that's a probably better place to start.

Ordinary folks are definitely much more thinking in terms of that like kind of prayer mode. And if you try it out and you realize like, 'oh, this, you know, know, this is really speaking to me. And this is helping me tap into frequency, a source of meaning that I was missing before' ... that's the experience people have when they're undergoing a Christian religious conversion. If it leaves you cold, and this is one of the things that's nice about James it's like, it might, you know, this might not really be an authentic option for you. And certainly, Christian traditions have a lot to say about that too works in mysterious ways. We're not totally sure. We can explain to somebody in abstract detached, theoretical terms, why it would work or wouldn't for their particular life.

John Dickson:

Ignatius of Loyola - or St Ignatius - was a Spanish soldier in the 16th century. He was wounded in battle and spent months convalescing in a family castle where, out of boredom, he read about the life of Christ and began a journey of spiritual enlightenment. He went on to found the Jesuit movement - a religious order of priests who take a vow of poverty, chastity and obedience.

Anyway, Ignatius wrote a book of spiritual practices, which included what is now known as the *Examen*. It's essentially a method of reviewing your day in the presence of God - like a time set aside to reflect on where God is in your everyday life. We'll put a link to it in the show notes.

It's pretty full-on. I don't agree with everything in it (as a Protestant, I have to find something wrong with it). But it's pretty challenging - guiding you

through reflections on ... your own different sins, the reality of hell, the life of Jesus, his death and resurrection, and climaxing on a reflection on the fear and love of God.

Anyway, for Meghan, it's one of the practices you might consider if you were looking at 'trying on' Christianity, in the spirit of William James.

Every semester at Notre Dame, Meghan challenges her students to put William James's views on religion and faith to the test. They "practice" taking a leap of faith.

Here's how she puts it:

*"Find a ritual, practice, way of life, or spiritual tradition that's 'live', 'forced' and 'momentous' ... then put yourself in a position to actively participate in it. Ideally, you'll have some sort of guide, a friend or family member who knows the tradition well, who can walk you through the experience and help you debrief afterwards. To complete this exercise like a true Jamesian, turn off your inner sceptic for the duration of the experience, allow yourself to really enter into it, and then reflect on what you found after the fact. At some point, of course, you'll want to turn that sceptic back on and ask what evidence you have - or what evidence you acquired - for thinking that the particular practice or exercise is connected up in the right sort of way with the truth. But to complete this activity in the spirit of William James, it's important not to let the calculating, evidence-processing part of you take over. It's important to realise that this part of your nature belongs to a bigger belief-processing system, and the other part - the "passional nature" - is a crucial component in making sure that we don't miss the opportunity to acquire big, important truths."*

William James knew that faith is an important and necessary component of the good life. Not necessarily religious faith - though he would argue that is, also - but faith as in believing something that we just don't have sufficient evidence for. In the 19th century, the world was uncertain. In the 21st century, the world is *still* uncertain. In fact, the list of the things we don't know is just getting longer. Faith is necessary.



William James ended his famed 'The Will to Believe' lecture by quoting another 19th-century philosopher, James Fitzjames Stephens. Here's what he said:

***Excerpt - William James - 'The Will To Believe'***

*In all important transactions of life we have to take a leap in the dark. . . . If we decide to leave the riddles unanswered, that is a choice; if we waver in our answer, that, too, is a choice. . . . We stand on a mountain pass in the midst of whirling snow and blinding mist, through which we get glimpses now and then of paths which may be deceptive. If we stand still we shall be frozen to death. If we take the wrong road we shall be dashed to pieces. We do not certainly know whether there is any right one. What must we do? "Be strong and of good courage." . . . If death ends all, we cannot meet death better."*