

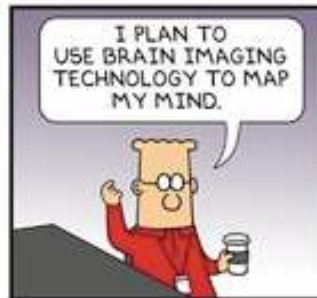
**INTRODUCTION TO
PHILOSOPHY**

PROFESSOR DUNCAN PRITCHARD

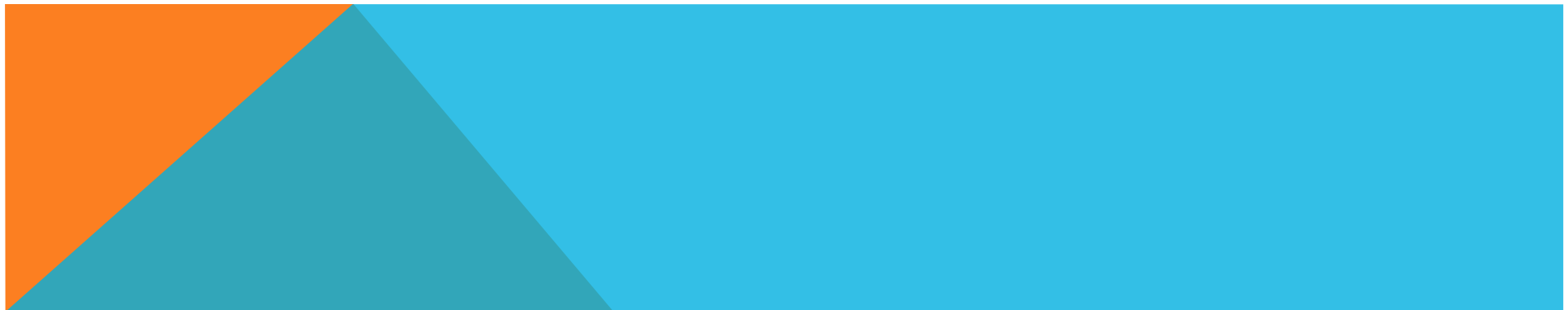
TOPIC 10

THE MEANING OF LIFE

DILBERT



BY SCOTT ADAMS



TOPIC 9

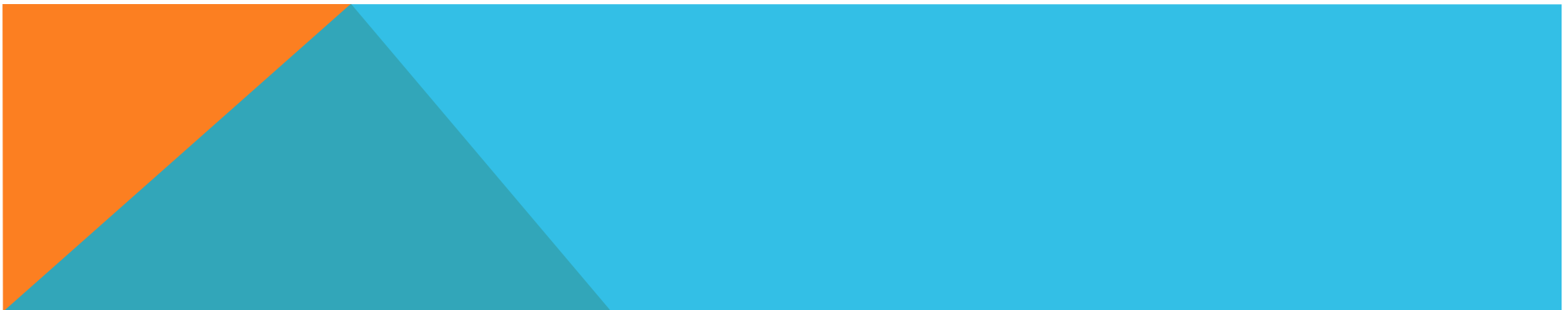
THE MEANING OF LIFE

- ❑ A lot of the topics that we've covered already have been in part about the meaning of life. If there is no knowledge, then that might make life meaningless. If there is no moral good, or no such thing as beauty, then that might make life meaningless. Perhaps the existence of God is a prerequisite of a meaningful life? And so on.
- ❑ In this section we will focus on the question of the meaning of life in its own right.



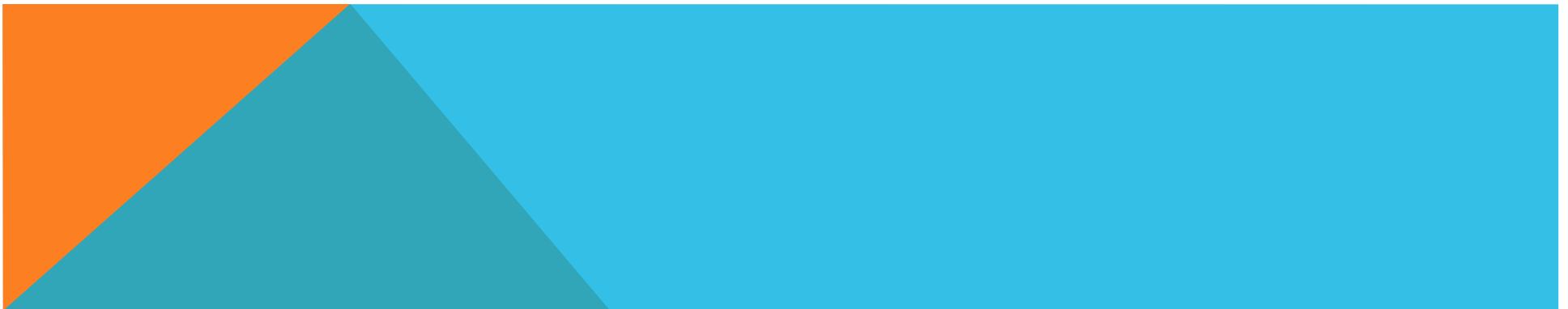
GOD AND MEANING

- ❑ Is the existence of God required for life to be meaningful? Historically, many have thought so, though this view is not so popular today.
- ❑ Usually, what is demanded by such God-based accounts of the meaning of life is both that God exists and that we have the right kind of relationship to Him. If either condition isn't met, then life is meaningless.
- ❑ (Note that in the latter case, the 'right kind of relationship' to God might be broad enough to allow some non-believers to lead meaningful lives).



GOD AND MEANING

- ❑ Why might only God confer meaning on our lives?
- ❑ Is this because the natural universe is inherently meaningless, and hence only a supernatural being distinct from the universe can confer meaning upon it?
- ❑ Another possibility: only God can provide one's life with ultimate *purpose*.



GOD AND MEANING

- ❑ One explanation of how God can confer meaning on our lives is via the claim that only God can be the source of (objective) morality.
- ❑ This ethical theory is known as the *Divine Command* view. Without God, there is no moral right and wrong, and hence our existences lack moral purpose.
- ❑ The idea is that moral purpose is an essential ingredient of meaningful life.



GOD AND MEANING

- ❑ In order to make this view plausible, one needs to answer the Euthyphro Dilemma that we encountered in a previous topic.
- ❑ Does God will the good because it is good? If so, then the good is independent of God. Or does God's willing it make it good? If so, then the good is entirely arbitrary, in that it could have been anything,
- ❑ One response to this dilemma, due to both St. Augustine and St. Aquinas, is to claim that goodness is inseparable from God's nature (as we also saw in the previous topic). There can be no goodness that is prior to God's endorsement of it, but neither is what God endorses arbitrary.



St. Augustine
(354-430)



GOD AND MEANING

- ❑ One problem with the idea that God confers meaning on our lives via his moral law is that it seems that the meaningful life ought not to be (exclusively) identified with the moral life.
- ❑ What about a life devoted to creating great beauty, for example, or which leads to a deeper scientific understanding of our universe? Wouldn't we count such a life as meaningful, even if there wasn't any great moral mission involved?
- ❑ (Consider the case of Gauguin, who abandoned his family to pursue his art).



Paul Gauguin
(1848-1943)



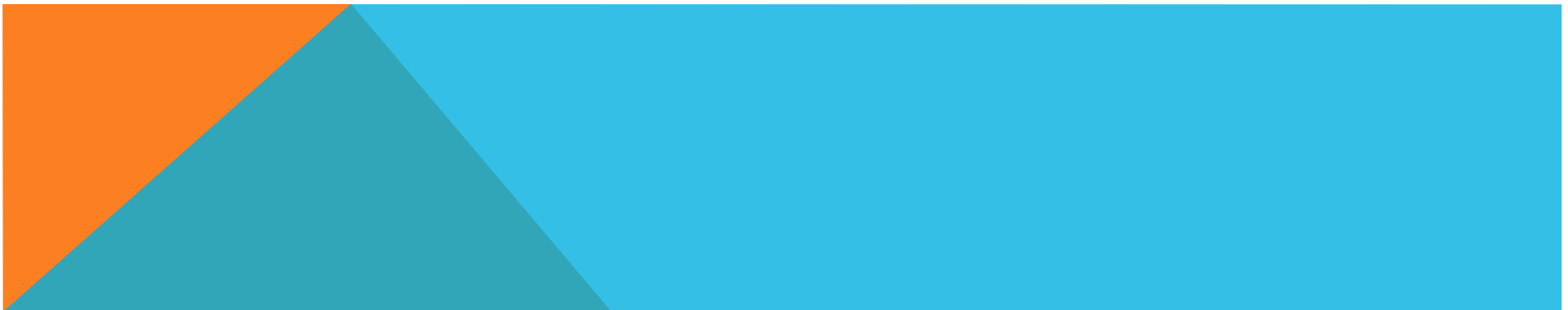
GOD AND MEANING

- ❑ Another problem with the view is that most theistic religions have a conception of morality that requires complete obedience to God's will.
- ❑ But does that mean that God could require us to do something immoral?
- ❑ (Think, for example, of how God tests Abraham by asking that he sacrifice his only son Isaac).
- ❑ Another worry is that obedience to another's will, even if it results in moral actions, doesn't seem like the right source of morality.



GOD AND MEANING

- ❑ A broader problem with the idea that God confers meaning onto our lives—however that is done, whether by conferring ultimate purpose onto our lives, or through being the source of an objective morality, etc—is that we seem to be able to at least conceive of meaningful lives even if God doesn't exist.
- ❑ Take your favourite case of a meaningful (but not religious) life. Nelson Mandela, for example. Even if there is no God, wouldn't you think that this was a meaningful existence?



SOULS AND IMMORTALITY

- ❑ Perhaps what confers meaning on our lives is that we have immortal souls (or, at least, the promise of immortality)?
- ❑ Note that although souls tend to go hand-in-hand with the existence of a God, this isn't required. Perhaps we have souls and there is no God.
- ❑ According to soul-based views, what gives our life meaning is the promise of exiting this earthly plane and living thereafter on some eternal spiritual plane (e.g., Heaven).



SOULS AND IMMORTALITY

- ❑ One rationale for this view is that there cannot be perfect justice on earth.
- ❑ Some sinners will go unpunished, and some who are sinned against will not be compensated. But the possibility of this spiritual plane allows for this perfect justice to be ensured.
- ❑ (But isn't God required to make this happen?)



SOULS AND IMMORTALITY

- ❑ Another rationale for a soul-based theory is that if our lives are finite then it seems inevitable that they are meaningless. Viewed from the perspective of eternity (or *sub specie aeternitatis*, as it is known), our finite lives are essentially nothing. So it is only if we can have eternal life that meaning can be conferred.
- ❑ One worry about this is that merely having a longer life doesn't seem to confer meaning. If it was meaningless before, then surely it is still meaningless afterwards—there's just more of it. Why doesn't this apply to an eternal life? (Or is there really something about eternity that marks the difference here?)

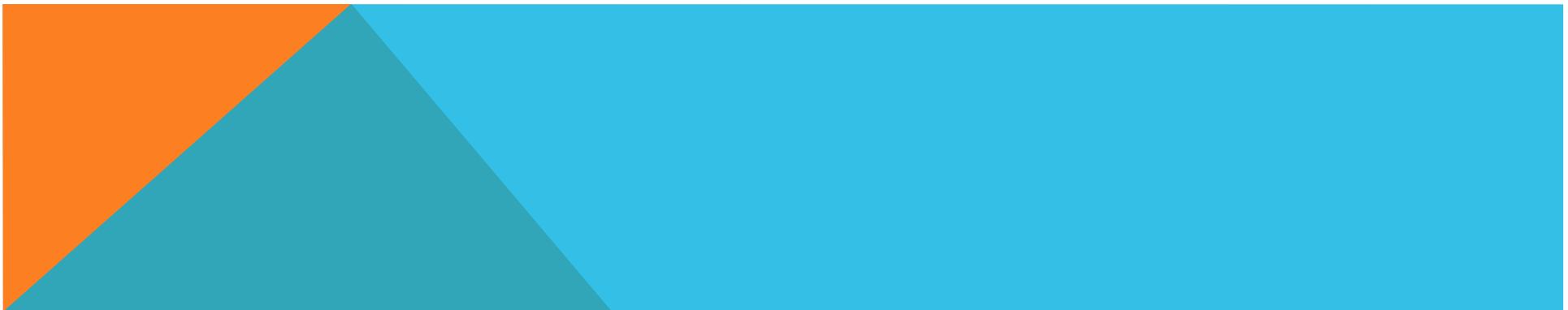


SOULS AND IMMORTALITY

- ❑ Perhaps immortal souls are needed for a meaningful life, because it is only by being immortal that one can make a permanent difference to the world.
- ❑ Otherwise, at least when our lives are viewed *sub specie aeternitatis* anyway, all of our accomplishments are impermanent and hence essentially nothing.
- ❑ But why should an impermanent accomplishment—such as Mandela’s great achievements—count for nothing?
- ❑ Besides, it’s not obvious why making a permanent difference is so important. (Imagine inventing a device that permanently destroys part of the universe!)



Leo Tolstoy
(1828-1910)

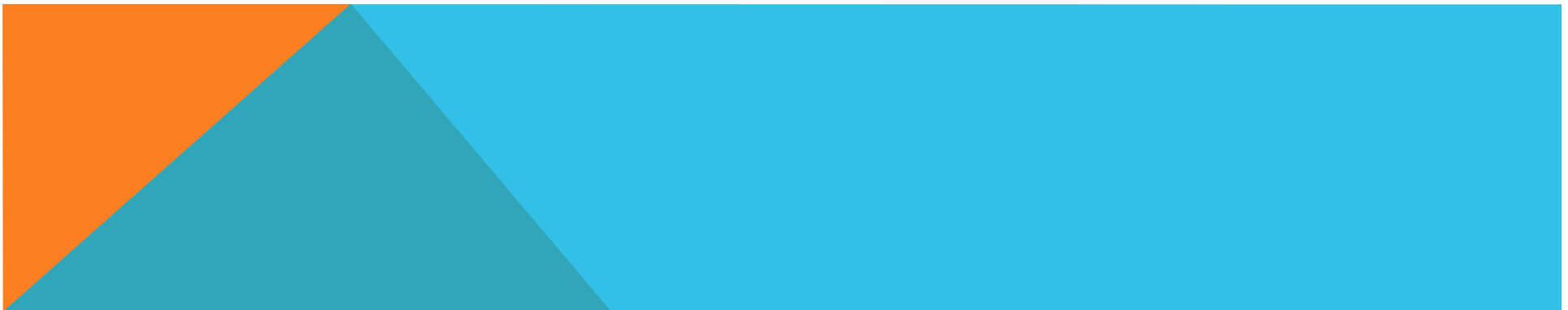


SOULS AND IMMORTALITY

- ❑ Another worry is that perhaps death is required to give life meaning.
- ❑ As the contemporary philosopher Martha Nussbaum (b. 1947), following Lucretius (95 BC-55 BC), has argued, many of the virtues that constitute a life of flourishing presuppose death (such as courage).
- ❑ Moreover, it is only if we die that our activities have the kind of intensity that makes them meaningful. (Imagine doing the same things every day for an eternity).
- ❑ (But perhaps all that is required is that we don't know that we are immortal).



Lucretius (95 BC-55 BC)



NATURALISM AND MEANING: SUBJECTIVISM

- ❑ Can we account for the meaning of life without appealing to anything supernatural? That is, while appealing only to the natural world around us?
- ❑ According to *subjectivism*, it is us who confer meaning on our lives (e.g., by being ‘true to ourselves’), and there are no universal criteria for a meaningful life.
- ❑ Consider Chekov's ‘black monk’, or *existentialism*, as defended by Albert Camus (1913-60).
- ❑ But what about someone who devotes their life to pointless or wicked things?

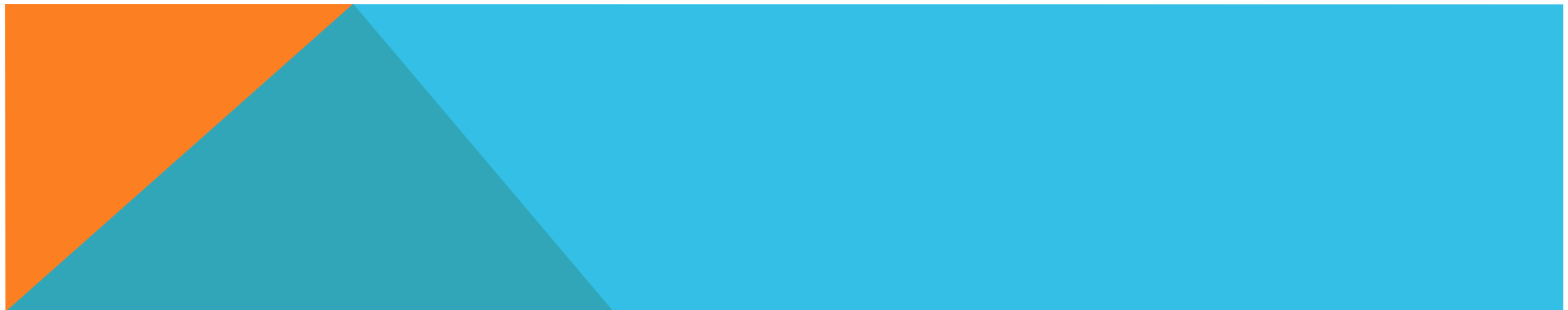


Albert Camus
(1913-60)



NATURALISM AND MEANING: OBJECTIVISM

- ❑ According to *objectivism*, in contrast, we cannot confer meaning on our lives ourselves.
- ❑ There are rather objective criteria for a good life (e.g., one's fundamental goals and values must be finally valuable).
- ❑ Consider the perspective of one's death bed.
- ❑ Or consider Percy Bysshe Shelley's famous poem, 'Ozymandiaz'.



NATURALISM AND MEANING: HYBRID VIEWS

- ❑ According to *hybrid views*, there is both a subjective and an objective component to a meaningful life.
- ❑ On the one hand, there are objective criteria for a meaningful life.
- ❑ But in addition it is important that we have the right subjective responses to those objective criteria (e.g., there are finally valuable goods, and one appropriately values them).
- ❑ But can there be such finally valuable goods in a purely physical world?

