Philosophy

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***Introduction***

“The Tree of Life” is an American drama Film that came out in 2011. Iota was an experimental project jointly produced by Sarah Green, Bill Pohland, and Brad Pitt. Dede Gardner, and Grant Hill and directed by Terrence Malick. The star cast included Brad Pitt, Jessica Chastain, Sean Penn, Tye Sheridan, Hunter McCracken, and Laramie Eppler. The film is based upon the Origin and meaning of life through the vivid memories of a middle-aged man from his childhood. The picture focuses on the initiation of the universe and the inception of life on planet Earth.

The plot of the movie revolves around a middle-class family who lives in Texas in the 1950s, the O'Brien's. O’Brien’s eldest son gets flashbacks and glimpses of his future life in which he sees his parents, Mr. and Mrs. O’Brien, and his younger brother R. L., who dies in the 1960s when he was just nineteen. The eldest son, Jack O’Brien is happily married with a family and has a job as an architect. He gets a flashback of the past as he sees darkness and then the universe, Milky Way emerging out of it, as the background voices keep asking existential questions. Further, he gets glimpses of the creation of the planet Earth, volcanic eruption and the birth of life in the form of microbes. Further, life starts developing, in the form of seas, plants and ultimately the biggest form of life as dinosaurs. The film has also portrayed the famous Cretacous-Paleogene extinction event.

The movie then turns towards the starting of a family by The O’Brien’s; their first child, Jack O’Brien is newly born, followed gradually by his two brothers. When young Jack reaches adolescence, he faces the choice of leading his life by way of grace or nature, as posed by his parents. Jack finds his parents, Mr. and Mrs., O’Brien as two different personalities whose personality is quite contrasting with each other. Mr. O’Brien is authoritative, strict and a pessimist as he sees the world as an exploitative and corrupt place. He works at a power plant and has a deep passion for music. On the other hand, Mrs. O’Brien is a kind-hearted and gentle woman, who cares for her children very much and presents the world as a positive and happy place.

Jack deeply hates his father and blames his mother for bearing his abusive behavior, which has turned him into a strict human being. He turns into a rebel once his father goes out on an extended business trip, and along with the other boys of his age, he takes questionable steps like vandalism an animal abuse. He also trespasses in a neighbor’s home and involves in stealing. Meanwhile, when Mr. O’Brien comes back from his business trip, he learns that the power plant he works for has been closed and he will have to work at an inferior position. This moves him deeply, and he apologizes to jack for rude behavior all these years.

The story then moves to the present, and Jack sees himself following a young girl who takes him through a wooden door located in rocky terrains. Here he sees a glimpse of the future in which he sees the images of death and the dead people coming back. He sees his parents, his dead younger brother and all the people he knew who were dead. His family is happy to see him. Jack then sees himself getting married and her mother handing over his son to the bride.

The film faced many delays in its release, which was initially planned in 2009 and then in 2010 due to post-production and developmental issues. The film was finally premiered in 2011 in Cannes Film festival, where it bagged Palme d’Or, the highest prize awarded in the Cannes Film Festival. The film was hugely acclaimed among the general audience. It also received great remarks and appreciation from the critics and was listed at the number one on the top ten Metacritic’s review aggregator. Moreover, “The Tree of Life” also appeared in the world’s top 250 movies as per the 2012 Sight and Sound Critic’s Poll and gained a position in the list of America’s greatest films as per the polls conducted by BBC. The film was also nominated for three categories of Academy Awards; Best Director, Best Picture and Best Cinematography.

***Discussion***

The movie has portrayed philosophical thoughts amazingly with excellent use of visuals and sound. The flashbacks and the flash-forwards have been shown intelligently with the use of visual effects. There are multiple concepts of philosophy that Malick tries to elaborate in a short span of time. The picture starts with the iconic statement from the Book of Job: "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the Earth? When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?” This statement is in itself a powerful package of philosophy in which the Creation of the whole universe has been summarized.

The second and most important concept that has been portrayed in the film is the depiction of Death. The basic question that will change everything last forever, or it has an end? The third major concept of philosophy discussed in “the Tree of Life” is regarding the way of life. The question has always been a hot topic of debate that how a person should lead their life, whether it should be according to nature or grace? All these and many other questions of philosophy are questioned in the movie, and the director tries to clarify many people's concepts and confusions in an innovative yet interesting way.

*Philosophical Ideas*

## The Creation of the Universe

The first and foremost Philosophical idea that has been explained and most probably the whole basis of the film is showing in the very beginning of the movie when a quotation flashes on the screen, from the Book of Job: "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the Earth?... When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?" [38; 4, 7]

This quotation clearly invites a human to ponder over the creation of this vast universe. The Creator himself addresses in Bible that where were you (mean the human) when the Universe was being created; urges the reader or the viewer to ponder over the fact that how was this universe built and how it has progressed. A normal human being may take many aspects of this quotation, but the clear meaning is the thinking over the fact of creation of this universe. The God Himself urges the human mind to ponder and investigate the process with which the universe was made; was it created on its own? Did someone create it? Did this Universe go through any stages when it was being formed? How did those stages prove to be for this Universe? How was our own planet, Planet Earth, was formed? What were the various phases of earth formation? How did life start on Earth? How did life come to the present stage?

The quotation may seem little, but it encompasses the whole universe in it and a number of procedures, phases, and stages. The director explains these concepts beautifully by taking the main lead of the movie, Jack O’Brien back in times, even before the creation of the universe and tries to answer these phenomena by showing the formation of the universe, the production of Milky Way, the formation of Earth, smoothly Moving to the initiation of life in the form of microbes and then plants on earth and then finally the great Cretaceous–Paleogene extinction event.

The Ending of Life

The second philosophical idea discussed in the movie is Death. Death has always been an interesting and widely discussed phenomenon, and there has been lots of discussion and debates over it. Many philosophers consider it an ending of everything for the person who dies. They are of the view that when a person dies, he or she just ends forever. Nothing of them remains behind, and it's a total finish of everything for them. On the other hand, there is a group of philosophers who are of the view that death is not an end; in fact, it is just a way or medium of transportations of a human soul from place to another, most appropriately from one universe to another. This ideology emphasizes that when a human dies, he or she does not end forever, but moves to another universe, which can neither be reached nor seen by the living and all humans will reunite in the Hereafter [[1]](#footnote-2).

The Director is also of the view that human life does not end with the death and portrays this notion in the form of flash-forward of the main character, where he passes through a wooden door and ultimately meets his parents and younger brother, who had died. The Wooden door frame depicts the death, the boundary between the two universes. The rocky terrain intends to show the hardships and difficulties a person has to bear to get to the other universe after death. When Jack passes through the frame, he enters a totally new world, where everything and everyone is happy, and no trace of sadness can be seen.

Nature or Grace?

Another critical question of philosophy, which the director has tried to confront and answer, is that how a person should lead their lives. There has been a long debate going on over this topic and experts have multiple opinions over it. Some philosophers are of the view that a person should lead their lives as per their own nature and the circumstances around them. Another approach tries to handle life with kindness, compassion, and care; No matter what the circumstances and situations are, a person should always be empathetic and helpful [[2]](#footnote-3).

Both these approaches have been adopted in the picture, in which two people are shown leading their lives following both approaches. Mr. O’Brien has been shown leading his life according to Nature; he is a very strict and rigid man who thinks that the world is a mean place. On the other hand, Mrs. O’Brien is an entirely opposite person having a soft and caring nature and leading her life according to the rule of Grace and considers the world as a place of wonder.

***Conclusion***

Although a person may feel confused and stuck while watching the movie, the ideas have been elaborated very intelligently, so that it becomes easy for a person to understand and unravel the mysteries of philosophy even for a layman. Sometimes it may feel that a person is watching two movies at a time or there has been an overdose of heavy philosophical ideas. Despite all these facts, a viewer gets to gain a bundle of knowledge from various events in the movie, happening with the O’Brien family and how they shape the behavior of the family. The film justifies the ideas of philosophy in a just and proper manner.

End Notes

1. Berglund, Mia MU. "Learning turning points—in life with long-term illness—visualized with the help of the life-world philosophy." *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-being* 9, no. 1 (2014): 22842.
2. Hittinger, Russell. *The first grace: Rediscovering the natural law in a post-Christian world*. Open Road Media, 2014.

1. Berglund, Mia MU. "Learning turning points—in life with long-term illness—visualized with the help of the life-world philosophy." *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-being* 9, no. 1 (2014): 22842. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Hittinger, Russell. *The first grace: Rediscovering the natural law in a post-Christian world*. Open Road Media, 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)