

# Movies and the Meaning of Life

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*Philosophers Take On  
Hollywood*

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Chicago and La Salle, Illinois

## TO THINK ABOUT

1. Christof believes we would rather live in a safe cell than seek freedom in the unknown world. Do you agree or disagree?
2. In what ways is Christof like God? In what ways is he different? Is there an analogy between Truman's rebellion against Christof and our own possible relation to some cosmic design or purpose?
3. Relating back to the Malcolm X quotation, what are some ways in which we can be deceived about who we are, where our lives are headed?
4. Can a life be meaningful if it's fake or counterfeit? Can "you" be real, while the life you are living is not?

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## 2

Our Place in the Cosmos:  
Faith and Belief in *Contact*

HEATHER KEITH and STEVEN FESMIRE

Some of [the experimental method's] obvious elements are willingness to hold belief in suspense, ability to doubt until evidence is obtained; willingness to go where evidence points instead of putting first a personally preferred conclusion; ability to hold ideas in solution and use them as hypotheses to be tested instead of as dogmas to be asserted; and (possibly the most distinctive of all) enjoyment of new fields for inquiry and of new problems.

—JOHN DEWEY (American philosopher, 1859–1952), *Freedom and Culture*

It's a hot, windy evening in the middle of the desert. You're sitting alone at the base of an imposingly large satellite dish—a telescope for detecting radio waves from insanely distant objects like quasars and pulsars. Only it turns out that you're not exactly alone. Your laptop is plugged into the dish, and what before was static in your headphones forms itself into a distinct and haunting rhythm. The aliens are calling, and they want to talk to you. You feel a shiver down your spine, a blend of elation and terror. Elation, because you have spent your scientific career poised to hear some hint of order in the cosmic chaos, and your professional credibility hinges on this moment. Terror, because—well, they are aliens, after all. It's an awesome experience. But now anxiety presses itself upon you. What on earth will you do with this information? What can it possibly mean? How does it affect your place in the cosmos? How can you even

be sure that what you are experiencing is real, not an illusion or hoax? How will others respond to you? Will they believe you? Why should they?

In *Contact*,<sup>1</sup> such is the experience of Dr. Ellie Arroway (Jodie Foster), a scientist working with S.E.T.I., the Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence. Based on the 1985 science-fiction novel by the astronomer Carl Sagan,<sup>2</sup> *Contact* tells the story of what a first encounter between humans and intelligent extraterrestrial beings might be like. It also details the complexities of faith and belief in a world where religion and science often come into conflict—a favorite theme of Sagan's, and a major subject in the history of philosophy.

This chapter explores tangles of faith and belief through the lens of philosophy and the characters and concepts of *Contact*. We pay special attention to Sagan's mouthpiece Ellie Arroway, who embodies the practice of *doubting* as essential to living a life rich in insight and meaning. While this is far from the sole philosophic quandary raised by the film, it is perhaps the central one.

### Making Contact

Perhaps, like us, you are a bit of a geek. Not of the stereotypical techno-crazed pocket-protector-wearing klutzy misfit variety, but simply someone more often transfixed by ideas than fashions and trends. Thinking matters more to you than what's on tonight at 8:00 or whether you're a Size 8. It's okay. You're not alone.

Here's some food for thought for us geeks wondering about meaning in life: We humans have been emitting radio waves, which travel at the speed of light (186,000 miles per second), for about one hundred years. So a sort of "shell" of radio waves extends a hundred light years in a sphere around Earth. This

<sup>1</sup> *Contact*, Directed by Robert Zemeckis, 2 hr. 30 min. Warner, 1997. Video-cassette.

<sup>2</sup> Carl Sagan, *Contact* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985), based on the story by Carl Sagan and Ann Druyan. Sagan gained national fame in the early 1980s as host of the PBS television series, *Cosmos*. He died in 1996. The last book he published before his death was *The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark* (New York: Random House, 1996).

shell is one-thousandth the distance across the Milky Way galaxy, one of hundreds of billions of galaxies. If intelligent beings were to emit powerful radio waves from the other side of our own galaxy, they and their planet might be long gone before we detected the signals. Or radio waves may have arrived while our distant ancestors were too busy being single-celled organisms in the primordial ooze. The most distant object visible to the unaided eye, our nearest neighbor the Andromeda galaxy, left its source around two and a half million years ago; anatomically modern humans, in comparison, evolved in Africa around 150,000 to 200,000 years ago.

It's humbling, but we historically educated geeks are used to being humbled. A few centuries ago our medieval European ancestors were safely ensconced as the central figures in the universe's drama of redemption. We're the end-all be-all of it all, they believed. Your great great grandparents were probably unchallenged in the belief that their species was specially created in an instant by a word from God. Your great grandparents' schooling probably did not include the notion that we live in one galaxy among many. Today, thanks to fellow geeks like Copernicus, Darwin, and Hubble, students today can contemplate their evolving primate lives circling a medium-sized star in a galaxy with hundreds of billions of similar stars in a cosmos with hundreds of billions of galaxies clustering across fifteen billion light years.

Now the story: Downtrodden by the loss of government funding for S.E.T.I., Ellie seeks financing in the private sector. Her passion finally persuades a corporate philanthropist, the eccentric and reclusive S.R. Hadden (John Hurt), to support her project at the Very Large Array radio telescope in New Mexico. Here, Ellie spends countless hours listening to static from space. At the last minute before her lease is revoked, she detects an encoded message emanating from the Vega star system, twenty-eight light years away. Disturbingly, the message includes a television image of Hitler at the opening of the 1936 Olympics in Berlin, the first television broadcast strong enough to be picked up in space. This prompts the President's Press Secretary (Angela Bassett) to exclaim, "Twenty million people died defeating that son of a bitch, and he's our first ambassador to outer space?" Apparently the message was an E.T. way of saying "hello, we heard you." Attached to this is a coded message that

Hadden helps Ellie to break: a blueprint for a machine that might take a passenger to meet the aliens.

In the midst of a predictable explosion of public attention, a conversation begins in various religious communities about the nature and consequences of such a discovery. From abductee fanatics to Christian fundamentalists to intergalactic Elvises, the public discourse seems to reflect more superstitious than scientific beliefs. While Ellie might want to ignore the religious buzz, it imposes itself on her world in the character of Palmer Joss (Matthew McConaughey), once her lover, and now a presidential advisor on religion and public affairs.

At first, Palmer is Ellie's foil. While she finds truth and meaning in scientific discovery based on hard evidence, his meaning comes via what he experiences as a personal relationship with God. Having read Palmer's book, Ellie quotes it back to him at a White House reception: "Ironically, the thing that people are most hungry for, meaning, is the one thing that science hasn't been able to give them." Ellie replies, "Come on, it's like you're saying science killed God . . . what if science simply revealed that He never existed in the first place?"

Ellie then introduces "Ockham's Razor," a principle made famous by the medieval philosopher William of Ockham (1285–1349) which holds that all things being equal, the simplest explanation tends to be the best. That is, the best explanation isn't an extravagant one, littered by unnecessary assumptions. Using Ockham's Razor, Ellie says: "So what's more likely, an all-powerful mysterious god created the universe and decided not to give any proof of his existence, or that he simply doesn't exist at all, and that we created him so that we wouldn't have to feel so small and alone?" While Palmer—ironically, like Ockham himself—can't imagine a meaningful existence without faith in God, Ellie finds meaning through scientific practice.

Even as a child, filled with grief after her father's fatal heart attack, Ellie seeks only natural explanations. In a misguided attempt to comfort Ellie, a priest tells her that all things happen for a reason. The death, he implies, is justified as part of a supernatural plan. Ellie agrees that things happen for a reason, but using Ockham's Razor she shaves away the supernatural assumptions: She laments that she didn't place her father's heart medicine in the more accessible downstairs bathroom.

### Wise Fools

Is there some particular way of forming beliefs that makes a meaningful life more likely? Let's assume, perhaps wrongly, that there is some correlation between living a meaningful life and sincerely pursuing truth: if ignorance is bliss, then only the timid crave bliss. Yes, we humans are all turtles carrying comfortable shells, but we engage life fully and sensuously only when facing the joys and hazards outside our shells. Is there, then, a way of forming and evaluating beliefs that can best be trusted to reveal the way things *actually* work rather than merely confirming whatever we *wish* to be true? This question is an important theme for Ellie, and also for the philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), an American regarded as the father of the philosophic tradition called Pragmatism.

Peirce (pronounced "purse," like a handbag) recognized that there is no psychological difference between believing a truth and believing a falsehood; whatever we believe, we believe is true until we have some reason to doubt it. As Socrates (Plato's teacher in ancient Athens) grasped 2,300 years before Peirce, we humans are a sophomoric bunch. A "sophomore" isn't merely an arbitrary and uninteresting designation for second-year college students. The word literally means "wise fool," someone who thinks she knows things she does not in fact know. What she mistakenly *thinks* she knows far exceeds the little she *actually* knows. To the degree that we are sophomoric, we mistake ignorance for knowledge, and we generally pay a price for this delusion. Avoiding this is one of the greatest challenges of human existence.

If only a bell would go off in our heads whenever we hit upon a true belief! Then we could escape the perils of ignorance. Our reputations would never again suffer from false claims of knowledge, our bodies would be spared the agony of false beliefs in our own abilities ("Sure, I drive better when I'm drunk," "Of course I can ski on the expert slope!"), and our social perspectives would finally be liberated from inherited prejudices about "our kind" and "their kind." An American philosopher and U.S. congressperson named Thomas Vernor Smith (1890–1964), influenced by Peirce, wisely observed that "much of the misery that men inflict upon one another is in the

name of and because of their feeling so certain that they know things and that the other fellow does not.”<sup>3</sup>

### Fixing Beliefs

In an 1877 article titled “The Fixation of Belief,” Peirce explores this human predicament. He describes ways in which people’s beliefs become “fixed” (in the sense of “hardened,” not “repaired”). We are all too aware of how people become “set in their ways” just as plaster becomes fixed or set. Peirce writes as though his descriptions are neutral, but he does not hold that all approaches are created equal. To the contrary, he implies that some ways of believing are more reliable than others. This may appear controversial, but consider his descriptions in turn. We’ll discuss them alongside corresponding characters in *Contact*.

According to Peirce, one very popular approach to believing is the “method of tenacity,” better known as the “ostrich mentality.” We are all experts at using this method. People sidestep their rational capacities and stubbornly avoid situations that might provoke doubt. In Peirce’s words: “When an ostrich buries its head in the sand as danger approaches, it very likely takes the happiest course. It hides the danger, and then calmly says there is no danger.”<sup>4</sup> Many people are remarkably skilled at hiding from all that could challenge their beliefs. This is the method of a religious terrorist in *Contact*. He simply won’t—or can’t—tolerate the obvious upshot of a message from outer space: the universe *doesn’t* revolve around humanity! So he denies access to the evidence by setting off a bomb in the heart of the machine. He and many others are killed in the massive explosion (a required element for all science-fiction films!), including David Drumlin (Tom Skerrit), the scientist who edged out Ellie in the bid to represent humanity to the ETs. This is indeed a dangerous and deadly method of believing.

A second approach, the “method of authority,” is to hold beliefs because institutionalized authority declares them to be

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Vernor Smith, *Creative Sceptics: In Defense of The Liberal Temper* (Chicago: Willitt, Clark, and Co., 1934), p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Sanders Peirce, “The Fixation of Belief” in *Philosophical Writings of Charles Sanders Peirce*, edited by Justus Buchler (New York: Dover, 1955), p. 12.

true. Since new discoveries can challenge traditional beliefs, this approach often works hand-in-hand with the ostrich mentality. Those who took a literalist view of scripture were infuriated by Copernicus’s 1543 *On the Revolution of Heavenly Bodies*, which proposes a Sun-centered rather than Earth-centered universe. Martin Luther quoted Joshua 10:12–14 in the Bible, in which Joshua commands the sun to stand still in the heavens. Luther reasoned that if the sun stood still, then it must first have been moving. Therefore, the sun is in motion rather than the earth. On the basis of scriptural authority, Copernicus was thus refuted, and human beings could for a few more years believe they were the literal center of the cosmos.

It is precisely this de-centering of humanity by science that leads some today to reject evolutionary biology in favor of an interpretation of religious authority. Some feel an almost primal need for humans to be the central figures on the Divine stage. In *Contact*, authority-driven fear sets the social environment within which the religious terrorist destroys the machine. Peirce evaluates the method of authority with biting sarcasm: “If it is their highest impulse to be intellectual slaves, then slaves they ought to remain.”<sup>5</sup>

According to the eighteenth-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant, the problem with those who follow the method of authority is not “lack of intelligence, but lack of determination and courage to use that intelligence without another’s guidance. Sapere aude! Dare to know! Have the courage to use your own intelligence.”<sup>6</sup> Recognizing the dangers of methods such as tenacity and authority, Peirce, like the philosopher John Dewey in the epigraph to this chapter, turns to science for a model of experimental, community-engaged, and error-correcting thinking. As Ellie sees it, religious believers like Palmer follow tenacious and authority-influenced methods when developing what she regards as their unquestioned and unanalyzed faith. Meanwhile, she exemplifies an approach to “fixing” her beliefs through constant questioning,

<sup>5</sup> Peirce, p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> Immanuel Kant, “What Is Enlightenment?” in Marvin Perry, *et. al.*, eds., *Sources of Western Tradition* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), pp. 54–55. Kant replaces the method of authority with an *a priori* approach that, according to Peirce, is not much better than what it replaces.

probing experimentation, and hard evidence: the method of science. Ellie, Sagan, and Peirce believe this method to be best suited to the quest for truth.<sup>7</sup>

### Science and the Meaning of Life

The philosopher Bertrand Russell wrote in 1903 that science reveals us alone in a hostile and purposeless universe, our loves and beliefs “the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms.”<sup>8</sup> We must, says Russell, revolt in active defiance of this meaningless void. Like Russell, Ellie does not believe science supports traditional religious beliefs about a divine cosmic plan. But in contrast with Russell’s pessimism, science gives meaning to Ellie’s life. By opening the doors to contemplation of the sublime vastness of the universe (“billions and billions of stars surrounded by billions and billions of galaxies,” as Sagan was reputed to say), science reveals that we Earthlings may be far from alone in the universe. If not, as *Contact* tirelessly repeats, “It’d be an awful waste of space.”

Yet science is not just about *conclusions*; it is a way of living and thinking that embraces intellectual suspense and constant questioning. Suspense is endured gladly in films, novels, and magic. It is not always welcomed, much less enjoyed for its own sake, in matters of real world beliefs—particularly religious, moral, and political ones. To Ellie, a scientific turn of mind spells an end to the dogmatism and fanaticism that mark the idea that beliefs can be declared true without worldly testing. Consider the feeling of absolute certainty that drove the Inquisition and that today drives terrorism, genocide, and nationalism. To whatever extent a belief is held scientifically, it is tentative and hypothetical. Through testing, we ask the world to answer back, and the answer we hear is always open to ongoing questioning.

This suggests a sort of faith that differs from the authority-driven variety. Ellie’s scientific faith embraces doubt and suspense as an ally, not an adversary. She passionately wants to be

<sup>7</sup> For more on science, pragmatism, and meaning, see Steven Fesmire, *John Dewey and Moral Imagination* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), Chapter 2.

<sup>8</sup> Bertrand Russell, “A Free Man’s Worship,” in *Why I Am Not A Christian* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1957), p. 107.

the passenger transported to Vega by the machine, and she appears before a committee formed to make that decision. Seemingly betraying her, Palmer thwarts her chances by asking her if she believes in God. While it happens not to be of any great importance to Palmer (who, out of romantic interests, wants Ellie to stay on Earth), other members of the committee and the general public are put off by her answer: “As a scientist, I rely on empirical evidence, and in this matter I don’t believe that there is data either way.” Since, one member of the committee falsely asserts, “ninety-five percent of the world’s population believes in a supreme being in one form or another,”<sup>9</sup> the committee chooses Ellie’s former boss and professional competitor, David Drumlin. He disingenuously seals the deal by saying what the committee wants to hear about “our most cherished beliefs.”

When the machine is sabotaged (killing Drumlin), Ellie’s dreams of cosmic contact seem destined to remain unfulfilled. However, the mischievous and ingenious S.R. Hadden arranges for Ellie to travel on a secret, second machine that has been built in Japan. The massive machine’s arms spin to create a highly charged vortex. Her pod is dropped into the energy field. The moviegoer shares her experience, which she describes as a trip through some kind of wormhole. Ellie apparently arrives on a planet that resembles a picture of Pensacola, Florida that she drew as a child. An alien greets her in the comforting form of her late, beloved father. Contact made, culminating in promises for future small steps in developing an Earth-extraterrestrial relationship, Ellie travels safely home after an eighteen-hour adventure. A baffled mission control, relieved that she was not injured, struggles to detect the source of what seems to them an obvious malfunction: her spacecraft appears to have fallen unimpeded through the machine straight into the water below. Only a few Earth seconds have elapsed.

This makes it difficult for even Ellie’s friends and colleagues to believe that she traveled light years away. In a government hearing dominated by National Security Advisor Michael Kitz (James Woods), Ellie is forced to scrutinize what she fervently believes to have been a non-subjective (that is, not a movie

<sup>9</sup> It should be underscored that this is a deeply misleading statistic, particularly in light of atheistic perspectives in Asia.

projection of her own mind) experience—the most awe-inspiring and meaningful one of her life. Was Ellie's adventure distinguishable from thousands of so-called “abduction” experiences, in which people faithfully and whole-heartedly believe they have been kidnapped and experimented on by aliens? She appears to have no evidence to prove that her experience was more than a vivid hallucination or nightmare. Yet Ellie has faith in her experience. Is her faith any different than the religious terrorist's absolute faith in the objective moral rightness of his suicide bombing?

In fact, one very important capacity sets Ellie's interpretation of her experience apart from the beliefs of abductees and religious fanatics: *doubt*. Rather than being mortally offended by others' lack of faith in her experience, she encourages doubt as the most reliable path to knowledge. In Sagan's own words: “Surely it's unfair of me to be offended at not being believed; or to criticize you for being stodgy and unimaginative—merely because you rendered the Scottish verdict of ‘not proved.’”<sup>10</sup>

### The “Beacon of the Wise”

We're prone to think the opposite of belief is disbelief—that, for example, the opposite of belief in God is atheism. While accurate as far as formal logic goes, this captures nothing of any relevance to how we think. The psychological opposite of belief is doubt, uncertainty about what to believe. To doubt that we're alone in the universe is not to assert its opposite. Ellie's doubt reveals her readiness to re-open her mind to other interpretations; this is what it means to have an open, rather than an empty, mind. She is not indifferent or slacking, nor is she merely putting on an act of doubting; she is simply unwilling to make claims that outstrip her knowledge. Peirce describes this scientific spirit: it “requires a man to be at all times ready to dump his whole cartload of beliefs the moment experience is against them. The desire to learn forbids him to be perfectly cocksure that he knows already.”<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Sagan, *The Demon-Haunted World*, p. 172.

<sup>11</sup> In Smith, p. 232.

Freedom from doubt is often purchased by those with low tolerance for bewilderment, but the price is high: such fear has always been a prelude to atrocities. The terrorist attack in *Contact* disturbingly illustrates this all-too-familiar point. Doubt is the key to learning and growth; it is essential to any passage from ignorance to knowledge. Insofar as one does not doubt one does not *grow*. For organic life, this is equivalent to death or dying. Ellie doubts her way to a meaningful and value-rich life marked by humility and tolerance.

In this spirit, the great philosopher (and ancient geek!) Socrates is reported to have said “the unexamined life is not worth living.”<sup>12</sup> In 399 B.C.E., Socrates was put on trial by his fellow citizens for “corrupting the young,” but he in fact aided young and old by showing that those who claimed to have wisdom often did not. Unlike those he daily questioned in the Athenian marketplace, Socrates was wise enough to recognize his own ignorance. Unlike his accusers, Socrates was not afraid of examining beliefs, and he encouraged such activity in others. He described himself as a “gadfly.” Just as a horsefly buzzing around your hammock makes it impossible to doze, Socrates pestered his fellow citizens whenever they were sleepwalking through life. He wouldn't let them intellectually doze, resting on whatever beliefs they happened to have picked up. While most of his neighbors mistook their unexamined beliefs for knowledge, Socrates creatively disturbed himself and others.

In contrast, because of David Drumlin's willingness to say whatever he thinks will get him aboard the machine (without opening himself up to self-examination and doubt), he gives up his integrity. J.D. Salinger's Holden Caulfield would have called Drumlin a “phony.” Two thousand, four hundred years ago, the unexamined beliefs of Socrates's accusers had disastrous consequences: he was executed by the state. Drumlin's life was also unjustly taken as a result of fanaticism, but he left little legacy of integrity and humility.<sup>13</sup>

Although Ellie's life is not on the line, her professional credibility and integrity are. In the end, it is intellectual humility that gives weight to Ellie's beliefs. Her openness to self-examination

<sup>12</sup> Plato, “Apology” in *Five Dialogues* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981), p. 41.

<sup>13</sup> Drumlin's character is much more nuanced in Sagan's novel, from which the movie is loosely adapted.

validates her experience—both to herself and to the audience—and nurtures her scientific and personal growth. As a scientist, Ellie must both trust her experience (as empirical data) and doubt it at the same time. Unfortunately, she—like us—is surrounded by people who are uncomfortable with doubt. Impatient, they have no tolerance for ambiguity. Fearful of being bewildered, they clamor for ironclad certainty. This fear drives Kitz to persecute Ellie. Like those who put Socrates on trial, Kitz probably believes that’s what the public desires. Ellie, however, responds to Kitz’s arrogance by expressing her own doubts rather than countering his abuse with statements of unquestioned truth. There is a vital lesson in *Contact* for our post-9/11 world. Again in the words of Thomas Vernor Smith: “The world may flee from doubt in fear; but the world will come back to the method of doubt in sanity.”<sup>14</sup> “Modest doubt,” Shakespeare adds, “is call’d the beacon of the wise.”<sup>15</sup>

In the hearing, Kitz ridicules Ellie’s claim that she traveled in the machine through a wormhole. He hypothesizes that either she is lying or that she is the victim of a malicious scheme of Hadden’s. When Kitz asks Ellie if she expects him to take her word on faith, she replies in a way that embodies experimental thinking and open-mindedness:

**ELLIE:** Is it possible that it didn’t happen? Yes. As a scientist, I must concede that, I must volunteer that.

**KITZ:** Wait a minute, let me get this straight. You admit that you have absolutely no physical evidence to back up your story?

**ELLIE:** Yes.

**KITZ:** You admit that you very well may have hallucinated this whole thing?

**ELLIE:** Yes.

**KITZ:** You admit that if you were in our position you would respond with exactly the same degree of incredulity and skepticism?

**ELLIE:** Yes.

<sup>14</sup> Smith, *Creative Sceptics*, p. 233.

<sup>15</sup> William Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida*, Act. II, Scene II, in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, edited by William Aldis Wright (New York: Garden City Press, 1936), p. 830.

But when asked why she doesn’t withdraw her testimony in this case, Ellie responds:

**ELLIE:** Because I can’t! I had an experience . . . I can’t prove it, I can’t even explain it . . . but everything that I know as a human being, everything that I am tells me that it was real. I was given something wonderful, something that changed me forever. A vision of the universe that tells us undeniably how tiny and insignificant, and how rare and precious we all are. A vision that tells us that we belong to something that is greater than ourselves, that we are not, that none of us are alone. I wish I could share that. I wish that everyone, even for one moment, could feel that awe and humility and hope.

### “I Don’t Know” (Or Does She?)

Though Ellie has faith in her own experience, she tempers it with a healthy dose of doubt. This moves Palmer, who himself evinces a new temperament of openness. When asked what he thinks is true, he replies, “As a person of faith, I’m bound by a different covenant than Dr. Arroway. But our goal is one and the same—the pursuit of truth. I for one believe her.” This openness to experience is a hallmark of Peirce’s method of science.

Unlike Palmer, the moviegoer doesn’t have to decide whether to trust Ellie’s experience. We can consider her claim skeptically, at least until the end of the film when we eavesdrop on a conversation between Kitz and the Press Secretary regarding video taken during Ellie’s “trip.” The video shows only static. But it shows *eighteen hours* of it. Although we may still be able to come up with reasons to be skeptical, this is substantial evidence for Ellie’s claim. Has director Robert Zemeckis made our experience of *Contact* more, or less, meaningful? Would having to wrestle with doubt about the reality within the film be a more meaningful, provoking, and fitting way to end Ellie’s story?

Rejecting blind faith, even in her own experience, Ellie finds meaning in examining her beliefs by embracing and encouraging doubt wherever possible. The end of the film finds Ellie giving a school tour of the Very Large Array. When a child asks Ellie



if there are aliens, she replies with the skepticism and humility of an experimental thinker:

**CHILD:** Are there other people out there in the universe?

**ELLIE:** That's a good question. What do you think?

**CHILD:** I don't know.

**ELLIE:** That's a good answer. A skeptic, huh? The most important thing is that you all keep searching for your own answers.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> For viewing *Contact* and offering suggestions and insights, thanks to Tatiana Abatemarco, Joshua Bakelaar, Daniel Guentchev, Elizabeth Howe, Charlotte Norris, David Rasmussen, and Alisha Rogers.

## TO THINK ABOUT

1. Should we approach all aspects of our lives with Ellie's skepticism? Moral beliefs? Political beliefs? Religious beliefs? Scientific beliefs?
2. By including hard-to-dispute evidence of Ellie's ET encounter (the eighteen hours of static), has director Robert Zemeckis made our experience of *Contact* more, or less, meaningful? Would having to wrestle with doubt about the reality within the film<sup>8</sup> be a more meaningful, provoking, and fitting way to end Ellie's story?
3. Some people have claimed that science has its own area of expertise and explanation, while religion occupies another. Neither account can give us the entire view of the nature of the universe. Do you think *Contact* supports such a position?

## TO READ NEXT

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