

THOMAS NAGEL

*What Does It All  
Mean?*

*A Very Short Introduction  
to Philosophy*

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We've been talking mainly about the problem of social justice within one society. The problem is much more difficult on a world scale, both because the inequalities are so great and because it's not clear what remedies are possible in the absence of a world government that could levy world taxes and see that they are used effectively. There is no prospect of a world government, which is just as well, since it would probably be a horrible government in many ways. However there is still a problem of global justice, though it's hard to know what to do about it in the system of separate sovereign states we have now.

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*Death*

Everybody dies, but not everybody agrees about what death is. Some believe they will survive after the death of their bodies, going to Heaven or Hell or somewhere else, becoming a ghost, or returning to Earth in a different body, perhaps not even as a human being. Others believe they will cease to exist—that the self is snuffed out when the body dies. And among those who believe they will cease to exist, some think this is a terrible fact, and others don't.

It is sometimes said that no one can conceive of his own nonexistence, and that therefore we can't really believe that our existence will come to an end with our deaths. But this doesn't seem true. Of course you can't conceive of your own nonexistence *from the inside*. You can't conceive

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of what it would be like to be totally annihilated, because there's nothing it would be like, from the inside. But in that sense, you can't conceive of what it would be like to be completely unconscious, even temporarily. The fact that you can't conceive of that from the inside doesn't mean you can't conceive of it at all: you just have to think of yourself from the outside, having been knocked out, or in a deep sleep. And even though you have to be conscious to *think* that, it doesn't mean that you're thinking *of* yourself as conscious.

It's the same with death. To imagine your own annihilation you have to think of it from the outside—think about the body of the person you are, with all the life and experience gone from it. To imagine something it is not necessary to imagine how it would feel for *you* to experience it. When you imagine your own funeral, you are not imagining the impossible situation of being *present* at your own funeral: you're imagining how it would look through someone else's eyes. Of course you are alive while you think of your own death, but that is no more of a problem than being conscious while imagining yourself unconscious.

The question of survival after death is related to the mind-body problem, which we discussed earlier. If dualism is true, and each person con-

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sists of a soul and a body connected together, we can understand how life after death might be possible. The soul would have to be able to exist on its own and have a mental life without the help of the body: then it might leave the body when the body dies, instead of being destroyed. It wouldn't be able to have the kind of mental life of action and sensory perception that depends on being attached to the body (unless it got attached to a new body), but it might have a different sort of inner life, perhaps depending on different causes and influences—direct communication with other souls, for instance.

I say life after death *might* be possible if dualism were true. It also might not be possible, because the survival of the soul, and its continued consciousness, might depend entirely on the support and stimulation it gets from the body in which it is housed—and it might not be able to switch bodies.

But if dualism is not true, and mental processes go on in the brain and are entirely dependent on the biological functioning of the brain and the rest of the organism, then life after death of the body is not possible. Or to put it more exactly, mental life after death would require the restoration of biological, physical life: it would require that the *body* come to life again. This might become technically possible some

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day: It may become possible to freeze people's bodies when they die, and then later on by advanced medical procedures to fix whatever was the matter with them, and bring them back to life.

Even if this became possible, there would still be a question whether the person who was brought to life several centuries later would be you or somebody else. Maybe if you were frozen after death and your body was later revived, *you* wouldn't wake up, but only someone very like you, with memories of your past life. But even if revival after death of the same you in the same body should become possible, that's not what's ordinarily meant by life after death. Life after death usually means life without your old body.

It's hard to know how we could decide whether we have separable souls. All the evidence is that *before* death, conscious life depends entirely on what happens in the nervous system. If we go only by ordinary observation, rather than religious doctrines or spiritualist claims to communicate with the dead, there is no reason to believe in an afterlife. Is that, however, a reason to believe that there is *not* an afterlife? I think so, but others may prefer to remain neutral.

Still others may believe in an afterlife on the basis of faith, in the absence of evidence. I my-

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self don't fully understand how this kind of faith-inspired belief is possible, but evidently some people can manage it, and even find it natural.

Let me turn to the other part of the problem: how we ought to *feel* about death. Is it a good thing, a bad thing, or neutral? I am talking about how it's reasonable to feel about your own death—not so much about other people's. Should you look forward to the prospect of death with terror, sorrow, indifference, or relief?

Obviously it depends on what death is. If there is life after death, the prospect will be grim or happy depending on where your soul will end up. But the difficult and most philosophically interesting question is how we should feel about death if it's the end. Is it a terrible thing to go out of existence?

People differ about this. Some say that non-existence, being nothing at all, can't possibly be either good or bad for the dead person. Others say that to be annihilated, to have the possible future course of your life cut off completely, is the ultimate evil, even if we all have to face it. Still others say death is a blessing—not of course if it comes too early, but eventually—because it would be unbearably boring to live forever.

If death without anything after it is either a

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good or a bad thing for the person who dies, it must be a *negative* good or evil. Since in itself it is nothing, it can't be either pleasant or unpleasant. If it's good, that must be because it is the absence of something bad (like boredom or pain); if it's bad, that must be because it is the absence of something good (like interesting or pleasant experiences).

Now it might seem that death can't have any value, positive or negative, because someone who doesn't exist can't be either benefited or harmed: after all, even a *negative* good or evil has to happen to *somebody*. But on reflection, this is not really a problem. We can say that the person who *used* to exist has been benefited or harmed by death. For instance, suppose he is trapped in a burning building, and a beam falls on his head, killing him instantly. As a result, he doesn't suffer the agony of being burned to death. It seems that in that case we can say he was lucky to be killed painlessly, because it avoided something worse. Death at that time was a negative good, because it saved him from the positive evil he would otherwise have suffered for the next five minutes. And the fact that he's not around to enjoy that negative good doesn't mean it's not a good for him at all. "Him" means the person who was alive, and who would have suffered if he hadn't died.

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The same kind of thing could be said about death as a negative evil. When you die, all the good things in your life come to a stop: no more meals, movies, travel, conversation, love, work, books, music, or anything else. If those things would be good, their absence is bad. Of course you won't *miss* them: death is not like being locked up in solitary confinement. But the ending of everything good in life, because of the stopping of life itself, seems clearly to be a negative evil for the person who was alive and is now dead. When someone we know dies, we feel sorry not only for ourselves but for him, because he can't see the sun shine today, or smell the bread in the toaster.

When you think of your own death, the fact that all the good things in life will come to an end is certainly a reason for regret. But that doesn't seem to be the whole story. Most people want there to be more of what they enjoy in life, but for some people, the prospect of nonexistence is itself frightening, in a way that isn't adequately explained by what has been said so far. The thought that the world will go on without you, that you will become *nothing*, is very hard to take in.

It's not clear why. We all accept the fact that there was a time before we were born, when we didn't yet exist—so why should we be so dis-

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turbed at the prospect of nonexistence after our death? But somehow it doesn't feel the same. The prospect of nonexistence is frightening, at least to many people, in a way that past nonexistence cannot be.

The fear of death is very puzzling, in a way that regret about the end of life is not. It's easy to understand that we might want to have more life, more of the things it contains, so that we see death as a negative evil. But how can the *prospect* of your own nonexistence be alarming in a positive way? If we really cease to exist at death, there's nothing to look forward to, so how can there be anything to be afraid of? If one thinks about it logically, it seems as though death should be something to be afraid of only if we *will* survive it, and perhaps undergo some terrifying transformation. But that doesn't prevent many people from thinking that annihilation is one of the worst things that could happen to them.

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*The Meaning of  
Life*

Perhaps you have had the thought that nothing really matters, because in two hundred years we'll all be dead. This is a peculiar thought, because it's not clear why the fact that we'll be dead in two hundred years should imply that nothing we do now really matters.

The idea seems to be that we are in some kind of rat race, struggling to achieve our goals and make something of our lives, but that this makes sense only if those achievements will be permanent. But they won't be. Even if you produce a great work of literature which continues to be read thousands of years from now, eventually the solar system will cool or the universe will wind down or collapse, and all trace of your efforts will vanish. In any case, we can't hope for

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even a fraction of this sort of immortality. If there's any point at all to what we do, we have to find it within our own lives.

Why is there any difficulty in that? You can explain the point of most of the things you do. You work to earn money to support yourself and perhaps your family. You eat because you're hungry, sleep because you're tired, go for a walk or call up a friend because you feel like it, read the newspaper to find out what's going on in the world. If you didn't do any of those things you'd be miserable; so what's the big problem?

The problem is that although there are justifications and explanations for most of the things, big and small, that we do *within* life, none of these explanations explain the point of your life as a whole—the whole of which all these activities, successes and failures, strivings and disappointments are parts. If you think about the whole thing, there seems to be no point to it at all. Looking at it from the outside, it wouldn't matter if you had never existed. And after you have gone out of existence, it won't matter that you did exist.

Of course your existence matters to other people—your parents and others who care about you—but taken as a whole, their lives have no point either, so it ultimately doesn't matter that you matter to them. You matter to

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them and they matter to you, and that may give your life a feeling of significance, but you're just taking in each other's washing, so to speak. Given that any person exists, he has needs and concerns which make particular things and people within his life matter to him. But the *whole thing* doesn't matter.

But does it matter that it doesn't matter? "So what?" you might say. "It's enough that it matters whether I get to the station before my train leaves, or whether I've remembered to feed the cat. I don't need more than that to keep going." This is a perfectly good reply. But it only works if you really can avoid setting your sights higher, and asking what the point of the whole thing is. For once you do that, you open yourself to the possibility that your life is meaningless.

The thought that you'll be dead in two hundred years is just a way of seeing your life embedded in a larger context, so that the point of smaller things inside it seems not to be enough—seems to leave a larger question unanswered. But what if your life as a whole did have a point in relation to something larger? Would that mean that it wasn't meaningless after all?

There are various ways your life could have a larger meaning. You might be part of a political or social movement which changed the world for

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the better, to the benefit of future generations. Or you might just help provide a good life for your own children and their descendants. Or your life might be thought to have meaning in a religious context, so that your time on Earth was just a preparation for an eternity in direct contact with God.

About the types of meaning that depend on relations to other people, even people in the distant future, I've already indicated what the problem is. If one's life has a point as a part of something larger, it is still possible to ask about that larger thing, what is the point of *it*? Either there's an answer in terms of something still larger or there isn't. If there is, we simply repeat the question. If there isn't, then our search for a point has come to an end with something which has no point. But if that pointlessness is acceptable for the larger thing of which our life is a part, why shouldn't it be acceptable already for our life taken as a whole? Why isn't it all right for your life to be pointless? And if it isn't acceptable there, why should it be acceptable when we get to the larger context? Why don't we have to go on to ask, "But what is the point of all *that*?" (human history, the succession of the generations, or whatever).

The appeal to a religious meaning to life is a bit different. If you believe that the meaning of

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your life comes from fulfilling the purpose of God, who loves you, and seeing Him in eternity, then it doesn't seem appropriate to ask, "And what is the point of *that*?" It's supposed to be something which is its own point, and can't have a purpose outside itself. But for this very reason it has its own problems.

The idea of God seems to be the idea of something that can explain everything else, without having to be explained itself. But it's very hard to understand how there could be such a thing. If we ask the question, "Why is the world like this?" and are offered a religious answer, how can we be prevented from asking again, "And why is *that* true?" What kind of answer would bring all of our "Why?" questions to a stop, once and for all? And if they can stop there, why couldn't they have stopped earlier?

The same problem seems to arise if God and His purposes are offered as the ultimate explanation of the value and meaning of our lives. The idea that our lives fulfil God's purpose is supposed to give them their point, in a way that doesn't require or admit of any further point. One isn't supposed to ask "What is the point of God?" any more than one is supposed to ask, "What is the explanation of God?"

But my problem here, as with the role of God as ultimate explanation, is that I'm not sure I

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understand the idea. Can there really be something which gives point to everything else by encompassing it, but which couldn't have, or need, any point itself? Something whose point can't be questioned from outside because there is no outside?

If God is supposed to give our lives a meaning that we can't understand, it's not much of a consolation. God as ultimate justification, like God as ultimate explanation, may be an incomprehensible answer to a question that we can't get rid of. On the other hand, maybe that's the whole point, and I am just failing to understand religious ideas. Perhaps the belief in God is the belief that the universe is intelligible, but not to us.

Leaving that issue aside, let me return to the smaller-scale dimensions of human life. Even if life as a whole is meaningless, perhaps that's nothing to worry about. Perhaps we can recognize it and just go on as before. The trick is to keep your eyes on what's in front of you, and allow justifications to come to an end inside your life, and inside the lives of others to whom you are connected. If you ever ask yourself the question, "But what's the point of being alive at all?"—leading the particular life of a student or bartender or whatever you happen to be—you'll answer "There's no point. It wouldn't matter if

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I didn't exist at all, or if I didn't care about anything. But I do. That's all there is to it."

Some people find this attitude perfectly satisfying. Others find it depressing, though unavoidable. Part of the problem is that some of us have an incurable tendency to take ourselves seriously. We want to matter to ourselves "from the outside." If our lives as a whole seem pointless, then a part of us is dissatisfied—the part that is always looking over our shoulders at what we are doing. Many human efforts, particularly those in the service of serious ambitions rather than just comfort and survival, get some of their energy from a sense of importance—a sense that what you are doing is not just important to you, but important in some larger sense: important, period. If we have to give this up, it may threaten to take the wind out of our sails. If life is not real, life is not earnest, and the grave is its goal, perhaps it's ridiculous to take ourselves so seriously. On the other hand, if we can't help taking ourselves so seriously, perhaps we just have to put up with being ridiculous. Life may be not only meaningless but absurd.