

# Meaning - Its Pursuit and Absence

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## **Anxiety: An Introduction**

I often times wake up in the middle of the night in a vivid panic. It is not that there is someone beating down my door (or even the worry of that), or that I have forgotten something terribly important that ought to have been front of mind. Rather, the terror comes to me across many years, reaching out from a far future that in the moment feels very near at hand. I hesitate to even address these feelings as they are childish and immature, the fear of death being something that all humans have confronted and managed, and which adulthood should inure one from. But it is indeed the fear of death that drives me into a furious panic. I quite literally jump out of bed, pacing the length of my apartment, heart pounding away and my cat looking quite confused for about 10 minutes before I can slide back into bed to confront the night again.

Fortunately such episodes do not repeat themselves in any single night and so a moments panic does not turn into insomnia but it does lead me to dread the

night. I much prefer the morning, very likely because of these reflections. I want to address a persistent set of feelings in my own life that I think have universal import. My ambition, and it is a heady and arrogant one, is to take a private neurosis and reveal its, small 'p', philosophical consequences. If I engage in what appears too much like a formal philosophical analysis of concepts, then you should immediately stop reading as I have definitively failed in my endeavor to express complicated and ambivalent feelings in simple ways. I will ask you to suffer through my use of inline citations as well as a bibliography of references.

This relationship of ambivalence, complexity and simplicity, is worth lingering on for a final moment as a means of introduction. A philosophy mentor, Prof. Byron, once delivered an insight to a class of very silent students that has lingered with me. These philosophy majors I suspect, though I can say for myself, were trying their very best to not look naive or stupid when discussing some es-

oteric argument in metaethics. Prof. Byron instructed us that “insight is a cooperative endeavor” and that making mistakes, venturing a thought that might be later revealed to be wrong, is no great sin when it comes to attempting to understand things that are far from intuitive. Later, in graduate school when reading Howard Becker’s *Writing For Social Scientists* I received another important lesson, which is that writing is not the thing we do once we have figured out where all our ideas stand relative to one another, or what conclusion the weight of evidence is tipping in. Rather, writing is a very important part of the process of understanding our own ideas, our own feelings about the various lines of argument vying for our attention and concession. So, getting things down on “paper” is to discipline thought so it can be further interrogated. And the lines of argument to be outlined here are in serious need of disciplining.

### Fear and the Features of Death

In the opening to Ernest Becker’s *The Denial of Death* (1975), he discusses some of the fundamental means that human beings have at their disposal to manage existential anxiety. Heroism, some feeling of distinction in the face of fear, is one of the primary symbolic means humans have for managing death anxiety,

which further contributes to a larger symbolic endeavor to achieve immortality that ultimately leads to the development and structure of civilization. Heroism, though, seems to be ineffectual to the needs of reassuring individuals about their ultimate ends, particularly when we consider the features of death that lead to so much pain and anxiety. Four features of death are particularly anxiety inducing and represent the unique features of this phenomenon: Inevitability (*In*), Universality (*U*), Permanence (*P*), and Irreversibility (*Ir*).

Inevitability means that no matter what action is undertaken in the intervening time, eventually, death will occur. What is also curious about this feature of death is that it is a form of causality that is irrespective of the particular cause, which might otherwise be called fatalism. Death will be the result of life, whether the specific cause is an aneurysm, heart attack, knife wound, car accident, gunshot wound, or any other proximate cause of cardiac arrest (which is the ubiquitous medically identifiable cause of death in hospitals, followed by respiratory failure). No matter how one lives their life, death will eventually happen, which feels unfair and thus some of the more memorable quotations from the Bible begin to make a little more sense.<sup>1</sup> The inevitability of

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<sup>1</sup>Matthew 5:44-45 “But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.” as well as this one from Marcus Aurelius 2.14 “Though thou shouldest be going to live three thousand years, and as many times ten thousand years, still remember that no man loses any other life than this which he now lives, nor lives any other than this which he now loses. The longest and shortest are thus brought to the same. For the present is the same to all, though that which is past is not the same; and so that which is lost appears to be a mere moment...”

death, in me, inspires a particular feeling of dread and helplessness unrivaled by any other feature of life and it is only through steeling myself in the most manly and fatuous way that I don't go begging for my mother's comfort, which isn't so manly.

Universality is apiece with inevitability though they are not synonymous features. Part of the issue of defining death that some philosophers have encountered is that because death is such a ubiquitous feature of life, articulating death's boundaries can be rather difficult (Feldman, 1994). Plain to see that death is a universal feature of human life, all men are mortal after all and Socrates is a man. And so all people in history have faced the same inevitable fate as I face and my family, and everyone that I meet on the street faces, and even my cat and all the cats I am to possess in my life. So it is also true of the trees in the park and the fish in the sea though the time scales of their lives may make the fate a much more proximate or distal event. In my mind, universality as a feature of death is less anxiety inducing than its other features because of my mortal selfishness. I am certainly concerned about the deaths of others and will mourn the deaths of others deeply, but I find *my own* inevitable death far more anxiety inducing than the fact that it must occur to others.

Permanence and Irreversibility are themselves also of a piece though, similar to Inevitability and Universality are not synonymous with one another. First, the relationship to Permanent and Irreversible states of affairs are not always so

intuitive. A state of affairs that is permanent is by definition irreversible, but irreversible states of affairs may very well be impermanent. Take for example the life cycle of the butterfly. An adult butterfly lays an egg which hatches into a caterpillar, which then forms a chrysalis before an adult butterfly emerges to lay an egg and so on and so forth. The transition from egg to caterpillar and caterpillar to chrysalis (or pupae) is irreversible but not a permanent state of affairs as is obvious by the further transitions in the butterfly life-cycle. What is an irreversible and permanent state of affairs is the butterfly's ultimate death: once the butterfly has transitioned from a living organism to a dead one, it has undergone a final, permanent and irreversible change. To be dead, if it is coherent to make such a statement, is a state of affairs that lasts forever and cannot be altered. Genghis Khan is just as much dead today as he was in the moments after he expired, and no amount of effort can be effected to reverse that event. Genghis Khan will never be alive again, the identity of his organism was obliterated in his death.

To return to Becker's *Denial of Death*, it is important to note, and likely obvious to say, that humans are distinct among pretty much all creatures for the fact that we are able to understand and manipulate language in a highly sophisticated way. The natural distinction in language is between the explicit and implicit, the symbolic and literal. It is really only in essays like this one and academic lectures that we are oriented to making our language as explicit as possible, except for momen-

tary flights of fancy or leaning on poetical ways of expressing true things (poetry, after all is I think the attempt to say true things with concern for how they are pleasant or unpleasant to the eye and ear). What we mean when we speak, how we express ourselves and are heard by others is deeply important to being human. I take it for granted that at bottom, humans are social creatures, oriented to life within communities of other humans to whom they turn for support. I further take for granted that there is something about the human constitution that makes us want to be understood by those in our community. Small 'i' identity is important to navigating life and finding comfort. When we are not known or when our public identity is totally incongruous with our privately understood identity, we seek to resolve the dissonance, either by changing that private identity or the public one.

Meaning then is something that is very much at the root of our personal and collective projects as persons. Understanding the meanings emanating from others in conversation, in their actions and the meanings of our own actions. What more there are the meanings of the institutions that we are related to or the organizations we rely upon. We do not want to participate in an endeavor that portends or means something bad for the world, and favor things that mean good things for the world. Or we mean to do good and avoid doing bad, we mean to treat others with respect and dignity, while avoiding meaning to treat them with abuse etc. We want the movies we watch to mean something to us, and avoid

doing meaningless things or wasting our time. Meaning is embedded in a vernacular of intentional action, purpose and value that we often take for granted but that permeates our activity. Attempting to get one's hands around such a concept takes a lot more than a few thousand words but alas. Then, we seek out meaning and avoid meaningless things, because we are meaning making and meaning recognizing creatures. So much so that we see meaning and agency in all sorts of places where there is likely none to be found (astrology, bumps in the night, finding heads up pennies, blue cars, etc.) but this takes for granted all the ways that we can find true or real meaning. We have to return to death now.

We are meaning making and recognizing creatures, seeking it out and participating in it, while avoiding meaningless things. One of the things that we are particularly interested in having is a meaningful life. Whether a meaningful life is the product of accumulating individually meaningful activities or in having singularly and highly meaningful features of your life. We take for granted that such a feature of human life is available to us. Death, because of the above outlined features, seems to undermine human being's ability to pursue meaningful endeavors, and that inability is distressing. Death is undermining because it means that we are participating in things that end, and things that end can't have the kind of meaning that we are interested in having. A permanent meaning, an eternal meaning, a cosmic order in which our lives and endeavors make a contri-

bution. Instead, we live trivial lives, of no significance, lacking the respect of our peers, or gripped with their admiration, given a polite eulogy before being laid to rest. Then our names are forgotten and never said again, and the last person dies with knowledge of our lives and we suffer the second death of absolute annihilation.

### Meaning Making and the Significance of Death

Robert Nagel in his essay “The Absurd” (1971) attempts to undermine these distressing feelings, first noting that they are often felt “vividly and continually”, before aptly noticing that if “there is no reason to believe that anything matters, then that doesn’t matter either, and we can approach our absurd lives with irony instead of heroism or despair”. Certainly, this is a common refrain leveled at individuals who relent against Nihilism, that fretting over something that is recognized as being meaningless is somehow inconsistent. Really, the criticism is misguided, as one who believes in nothing, or believes that everything is meaningless doesn’t have to give an explanation of their action, as they don’t believe there is a coherent order in which that action makes sense. It is anti-nihilists or non-nihilists who have the much harder job of making sense of

their action and motivation. But regardless, Nagel’s point is clever but like little comfort and I still have panic attacks at night. He goes on to observe, contrary to common claims, that it is not simply relationships of space or time that bear on the question of meaning in human life: “Reflection on our minuteness and brevity appears to be intimately connected with the sense that life is meaningless; but it is not clear what the connection is.” It is not simply the case that because we are so small and our lives so short that life is absurd (or meaningless, as I maintain), but some other deeper feature of life. As the argument goes by Nagel, an absurd life would be just as absurd were it longer or bigger. It isn’t so much that the arguments for the absurd position can be secured indubitably, and yet it is a persistent feeling in our lives <sup>2</sup> We are skeptical of whether or not life has meaning, and believe that if it had none that would undermine our motivation for action and yet we are full of doubts that we are unable to answer and full of purpose which we are unable to abandon (Nagel, 1971, pg. 724).

Life, more often than not feels meaningless for some of the reasons that Nagel outlines; there is an incongruity to our activity. We seek meaning making and profundity and yet much of our is devoted to drudgery and self-maintenance,

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<sup>2</sup>Naturally, grounding an argument in such a way is a difficult place to begin (as Nagel even notes, Section IV pg. 722), as all that is needed to resolve the tension that the argument proposes is to undermine the very unsecured common feeling that secures it. Asking, “Is it *really* the case that people feel that life is viscerally and deeply absurd?” and asserting that it isn’t the case undermines the argument. My rebuttal to such a move would be to gesture vacantly at the more than two thousand year history of human art and culture greatly concerned with the role of meaning in our lives and its apparent absence.

<sup>3</sup>See Benetar’s *The Human Predicament* (2017) for an introduction to Philosophical Pessimism.

little is spent in self-actualization, and our ambitions almost certainly outstrip our status, station and ability.<sup>3</sup> Further, our personal pretensions about our own importance are the result of an asymmetric phenomenology in each of our lives; we are after all individuals, valuing our lives, perspectives and experiences before anyone else as they are ours and ours alone. Our subjectivity prejudices us in our own favor yet that same subjectivity is shared by everyone. These themes and thoughts are not novel and run deep in Existentialism, particularly Sartre's version (see Sartre (2012), Part Three, Chapter 1) and I review them here for emphasis. These are the "living" features of life that lead it to be absurd and meaningless; Death on the other hand has a different influence. Death annihilates our endeavors for personal or collective improvement, and the lives we save are destined to die. Striving to improve one's self, to become expert in some area, or to gain some refined practical skill, seems absurd and meaningless because endeavoring to do so leads to the same place, the Grave, and inert eternity.

### What is Dead May Never Die

Often times, when engaged in conversations about meaning and its absence in human life, individuals will note that meaning, and purpose and value is immediately accessible to them in their moment to moment experience and that even the very act of engaging in the conversation is a meaningful act. What undermines such a claim? I think that it often simply means that they enjoy the con-

versation or that they have nice things in their lives, but that is not equivalent to the kind of meaning that we are often talking about when we are talking about our position the universe and our lives ultimate end. Also, the conversation is meaningful *now* to those engaged in it, but not to anyone else, and it will only be retrospectively meaningful to me so long as I can remember it, and it will cease to be meaningful to you once you forget about it. The same is true of the claim that just because a movie ends or a meal ends doesn't mean it isn't meaningful but the sort of end we talk about when it comes to meals and movies is categorically different than the kind of end we mean when we talk about death. For one, the movie can be retrospectively meaningful when we recall the experience of watching it, the social aspects of its viewing, or the lesson it taught us or what it illuminated about the human condition. Further, the movie doesn't cease to exist once one completes its viewing, the film could be directly meaningful again if one re-watched it. Much of the same can be said of meals any many other things in life, before death occurs.

Death is a fundamental problem in life I feel, and though there is only one certain end for all of us, the natural theoretical alternative is also difficult to grapple with. Death undermines our ability to have meaning because all the lines of our activity lead to the same inert place, unremembered and unexperienced, as if they had never actually happened, but endless Life also feels hollow. Were we to live forever, what could *really* be meaningful, considering that all our activity

could be forever postponed. Love loses its vigor, and eternity looks quite boring. This antinomy is similar to the one outlined above by Nagel, but slightly different for its conclusions. Where Nagel was making a point that our justifications for the feelings that life is meaningless or absurd are poorly connected to duration or space, I maintain that the antinomy simply reveals that life itself is Meaningless. If it is bad that life eventually ends and it would also be bad were it to last forever how can life be good at all. It feels as if we are trapped between two very dire cosmic possibilities both horrific in unique and terrible ways.

## References

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