Introduction: Death and Meaning

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Due to the Covid pandemic, the *Royal Institute of Philosophy Annual Conference 2020* had to be postponed and was eventually held online in July 2021. The conference, on which this volume is based, was meant to explore the connection between death and meaning (in life).

What motivated me to host a conference on that particular theme was initially my interest in the philosophical debate on human enhancement and the possibility and desirability (or undesirability) of radical life extension. Naturally, that debate is complex and touches on many different aspects of the human condition. However, there is one claim in particular that captured my attention because the question it raised struck me as being of fundamental importance for the entire discussion. It is the claim, occasionally made by transhumanists and other proponents of radical life extension, that *death undercuts meaning*, in the sense that as long as our lives will have to end someday, our lives cannot possibly be meaningful (More, 1990). Even religion with its promise of a life after death, it is alleged, can only ever achieve the illusion of meaning, but never the real thing. This is mainly because true meaningfulness cannot be derived from being part of somebody else's (in this case God's) plan, which supposedly has the inevitable effect of stifling a sense of our own personal value. Yet it is claimed that without such a sense of personal value our (individual) lives must lack true meaning, for what gives our lives (true) meaning is 'the continuation of the process of improvement and transformation of ourselves into ever higher forms' (More, 1990, p. 10). Since this process is understood as open-ended, it is clear that death, by bringing it to an end, destroys not only the meaning that any individual life can have up to the point of its termination, but the very possibility of meaning. If our lives can only have meaning if we can pursue 'our own expansion and progress without end' (More, 1990, p. 12), then life can only be meaningful if it never ends. That connection to meaning may well play a part in why death is often perceived and described as the greatest evil.[1] It is the greatest of evils not merely because it sets an end to

[1] See for instance Bostrom (2005), de Grey and Rae (2007).

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our life, to our aspirations, hopes and plans,[2] or because it deprives us of all future pleasures (Bradley, 2004), but because it is, rightly or wrongly, believed to render all we do meaningless. For this reason, the argument goes, we need to do everything in our power to stop the presently inevitable decline of our bodies and find a way to extend human lifespan indefinitely.

This is certainly an extreme view because it assumes that nothing but a life without end can satisfy our desire for meaning. Simple life extension will not be enough. But even though it is an extreme view, it is not wholly implausible. It is easy to feel that if one day, however far in the future that may be, everything is over for us and, worse still, nothing will remain of what we have done and achieved in this life, then our hopes and aspirations are actually quite pointless. If there will come a day when nothing we ever did matters anymore, then it seems that it doesn't really matter already. It may matter *to us*, but not in itself. And that is what meaning (or at any rate the kind of meaning we desire) seems to require: that our lives have some objective and permanent significance (Hauskeller, 2017).

Yet it is of course far from obvious that our lives can only have such objective and permanent significance if they do not end. What we do in this life may well matter in the sense that it makes a difference, that it contributes to shaping the future of other people (so that the future would be different had we never existed or had we acted in a different way), and if it does matter in that sense, then it seems that it does so whether or not we will still be around to witness and appreciate it. Not all we do we do for ourselves, and only what we do for ourselves might retrospectively appear pointless when we die. The meaningfulness of what we do for others, however, remains unaffected by our own death, though it may plausibly be thought to be affected by *their* deaths. But perhaps that kind of meaningfulness is not what those who claim that there can be no meaning in a mortal life are talking about. So what kind of meaning is it exactly that is threatened by our mortality – if it is indeed threatened by it? Does it perhaps depend on a particular world view, so that, if we do not share that world view, we can easily do without it and find a different, but perfectly sufficient meaningfulness in a mortal life? Or is it really the case that even if what we achieve in this life will not someday be lost to the world, if it will indeed make a lasting difference (presumably for the better), that

[2] See Thomas Nagel's 'Death' in his (1970, pp. 1–10); Nussbaum (1994, updated edition 2009, pp. 207–210).

even then our life will have been meaningless if it has ended or is going to end?

It would seem, though, that the view that meaningfulness in life requires an infinite life span (or, even stronger, a de facto never-ending life) implies, rather implausibly, that no human that has ever lived has had a meaningful life. The common belief that some (mortal) lives are more meaningful than others (or are meaningful while others are not) would thus be mistaken because all (mortal) lives would in fact be equally meaningless. This raises the interesting (and puzzling) question whether meaningfulness is a quality that a life either does or does not have, or rather one that a life can have to a greater or lesser extent. If the latter, then we could concede that mortal lives can have some meaning, and at the same time insist that only an immortal life can be completely meaningful, or meaningful at the highest level. But does that even make sense? Are there indeed lower and higher orders of meaning (of which the higher orders are only accessible in an immortal life), or lives that are 100% meaningful and others that are only, say, 50% meaningful?

It has also been argued, by Leon Kass and others, that far from requiring immortality the meaningfulness of our lives, on the contrary, directly *depends* on our mortality (Kass, 2002; 2003; Nussbaum, 2013, pp. 225–32). According to this view, it is mortality that makes life matter in the first place. It is the knowledge that we will have to die, and not too far in the future, that makes things and people precious to us, that inspires love and a sense of beauty and the good, and that is ultimately the source of human dignity or self-worth. And without self-worth a meaningful life is not possible. Kass also stresses the importance of the natural life cycle, which must necessarily include a phase of rise, a peak, and a phase of decline if our lives are to have (a humanly understandable) meaning: 'A flourishing human life is not a life lived with an ageless body or untroubled soul, but rather a life lived in rhythmed time, mindful of time's limits, appreciative of each season and filled first of all with those intimate human relations that are ours only because we are born, age, replace ourselves, decline, and die – and know it' (Kass, 2003, p. 27). One might say that life, in order to have meaning, must have a 'significant shape' (Eagleton, 2008, p. 38), not unlike a piece of art or a dramatic performance, which no one would want to go on forever.

Others have objected that although life must indeed have a certain narrative shape to be truly meaningful, there is no reason why this shape should not extend beyond what is now the natural human life cycle and why we should not enjoy it indefinitely (Fischer, 2009). Even an immortal life can have a narrative structure and an

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aesthetically satisfying form if the events of one's life are suitably connected, if things do not just happen to us, but can plausibly be regarded as resulting from our own free decisions and as reflective of and informed by our own previous experience. Life is like a story (and has, for this reason, meaning or 'narrative value') if there is an intelligible connection between its parts, if it creates a kind of 'emotionally suffused' understanding. Although we would normally expect a story to have an ending, this is not necessary. 'Whereas the life as a whole could not be considered a narrative, the parts could be, and this would seem to render immortal life recognizably like our current human lives and also potentially desirable (in a distinctive way). The literary analogue for such a life is not the novel, but perhaps a collection of short stories' (Fischer, 2009, p. 158). What seems to matter most here is not really that our life has a certain definite shape, but that I can plausibly see myself as the author of my own life story, that my life reflects what I am (rather than the accidents of my existence).

However, this account is not without problems either, for it is not always clear to what extent the direction our lives take is a result of our own (free) agency rather than the result of dumb luck (good or bad), nor is it entirely clear why we should prefer the former. Usually it is an inextricable, happy mix of both. Moreover, we tend to be very good at making sense of what happens to us. Even something as unpredictable as a major win in the lottery can be easily integrated into our own personal life story and seen as resulting from our own agency. I can tell myself that I deserve this more than anyone else, that I was 'meant' to have all that money because of all the good that I can and will do with it, that I was the one who had the hunch that made me buy that lottery ticket on that particular day, which wouldn't have been possible if I hadn't made other decisions before, and so on and so forth. It is hard to imagine a life that is so accidental and causally unconnected that the one who lives it cannot possibly see it as a story unfolding.

Whether death interrupts that story or brings it to a satisfying conclusion probably depends on the kind of story it is. And whether or not we believe that our life story needs an ending to have a narrative value or be meaningful probably depends on what we think constitutes meaning. If we lay particular emphasis on agency and autonomy, if we insist on being the sole author of our own life story, then it is hard not to see death or rather mortality (the fact that we have to die sometime) as destructive of meaning. Yet if we are prepared to let things happen to us and to find meaning in what Michael Sandel calls 'the unbidden' (Sandel, 2007, pp. 45–47), then mortality

(which makes death the ultimate unbidden) may well be regarded as, perhaps not necessary for, but certainly conducive to, a meaningful life. That would also solve the problem of purpose, which in an unending life would have to be permanently renewed, so that no final purpose could ever be achieved. And nothing would appear worth doing because we could always just as easily do it tomorrow (Baggini, 2002, pp. 28, 54). Thus there is the danger of postponing one's own life indefinitely instead of living it in the present.

Now obviously death, or more precisely mortality, cannot be both a precondition of a meaningful life and an obstacle to it. So which is it? In order to find out, we would have to answer a number of questions, starting with those concerning the meaning of meaning: What does actually constitute meaning? What do we mean when we talk about meaning? Are there different kinds of meaning (perhaps one for mortal lives and a different one for immortal lives)? Are there different degrees of meaning (so that a life can be more or less meaningful)? How does meaning relate to happiness or well-being? Is a happy life necessarily a meaningful life (and vice versa, a meaningful life necessarily a happy life, and if not, why should we then care about meaning in the first place?).

I am not going to try to answer all these questions here. Each of them would merit a separate investigation. However, let me say a bit more about the last point, the connection between meaningfulness and happiness, to provide some context for the question. After being ignored by psychologists for a long time, meaningfulness has only recently become a topic of interest in the discipline. Even after the paradigm shift to a 'positive' psychology that slowly took place in the second half of the twentieth century, which led researchers away from the study of mental illness and towards the study of positive emotions, meaningfulness was hardly ever regarded and treated as an essential aspect of psychological well-being. Instead, researchers remained largely preoccupied with happiness and its variants. However, recent studies have shown that there are important differences between happiness and meaningfulness (Baumeister, Vohs, Aaker and Garbinsky, 2013), as has also been argued by various philosophers (Wolf, 1997; Metz, 2009; Kauppinen, 2013). Whereas, for instance, happiness seems to depend on the extent to which our needs and wants are satisfied, such satisfaction does not affect our sense of living a meaningful life. Thus it seems entirely possible for someone to live a happy but meaningless life, or, at the opposite end, one that is unhappy, but highly meaningful. It appears that meaningfulness has a very strong temporal dimension connecting past, present and future (whereas happiness is firmly rooted in the present), is more linked to giving

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rather than taking, and is also positively related to the extent of our engagement both with loved ones and strangers (Debats, 1999), all of which suggests an expansion of personal identity into forms of social solidarity (or more generally into larger, trans-individual units). This expansion is likely to affect also people's attitude towards their own death: what it means for them, how much they fear it, and how appealing the prospect of radical life extension is for them.

However, although these considerations can certainly bring us closer to an adequate understanding of the distinct nature of meaning, there are still other questions to be answered before we can claim to have a clear picture. For instance, what is the difference between meaning and value? Can a life be meaningful, but bad, even morally obnoxious (as for instance Steven Luper 2014 suggests)? Can it be devoid of meaning, but still valuable and worth living? Does there have to be an objective dimension to meaning or is it just a question of giving ourselves a purpose in life, no matter how trivial that purpose may be? Is my life meaningful whenever I regard it as such or do I have to connect with something that is intrinsically valuable? Susan Wolf has claimed that 'meaning arises from loving objects worthy of love and engaging with them in a positive way' (Wolf, 2010, p. 8). Is she right?

In addition, there are other questions that pertain more directly to the immortalist position. In what way exactly can the fact that we have to die be thought to undercut meaning? Or is it the knowledge or belief that we have to die that has this effect, as some have argued (Swenson, 2000)? And if an immortal life is really necessary for meaning, why would a life after death, as it is promised by some religions, not be sufficient? What exactly is the difference between (real) meaning and the mere illusion of meaning? And if we don't really need immortality, but merely more time, then how much more time exactly do we need in order to render our lives meaningful? How much is enough?

Thaddeus Metz has pointed out that it is not enough to ask whether only an immortal life can be meaningful (Metz, 2003). We will also have to specify what *kind* of immortality is required for what kind of meaning, because we can imagine various forms of immortality and various forms of meaning. Thus an immortal life can be one that does not *have* to end (because of the absence of ageing or other forms of material deterioration, its general resilience, or its transferability to other substrates), a life that does not have any *de facto* end, a life that *cannot* end, a life that ends, but is then renewed, a life after death in some world-transcendent realm, a life in heaven, or a life in hell. Presumably it makes a difference for the

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meaningfulness of life which of these immortalities we are talking about. Likewise, it is quite possible some of these different immortalities are compatible with some understandings of meaningfulness, but not with others, so it needs to be clarified what kind of meaning, if any, requires what kind of immortality. However, to answer this question, it needs to be examined what exactly it is that those different forms of immortality would allow us to do or be that we would not be able to do or be without them, and how whatever that will turn out to be is related to a meaningful life.

Yet it is not only the position of the immortalist and radical life extensionist that is in need of clarification. The claim that death and a natural (that is currently normal) human lifespan are in fact prerequisites of a meaningful life also faces difficulties and gives rise to certain questions: Will life *inevitably* become meaningless at some point in an indefinitely extended life? Will it then really be too late to end one's life (in the sense described above)? Can we see the (intrinsic) value in things and other people (and indeed life itself) only if those things are fragile and bound to perish? Why should something eternal (even something that is by its very nature indestructible) not be seen as valuable in itself? (Isn't God highly valued by many people?) Why should it be necessary for life to have not only a beginning, but also an end? Would that imply that for the world as a whole to have meaning, it too will have to end one day? And why should we need a final purpose, instead of an open-ended sequence of purposes, to make our lives meaningful?

Now why is important to explore the issue and to answer all those questions? I can think of at least three good reasons. First, radical life extension is an area of scientific research that increasingly attracts interest and funding, as those working in the area, encouraged by the rapid development of new biotechnologies and recent progress in genetic manipulation, feel that they are close to 'rejuvenation breakthroughs that could reverse human aging in our lifetime' (de Grey and Rae, 2007, subtitle). This is supported by a growing number of philosophers and ethicists who argue that nothing is more important than that we figure out how to defeat ageing and death.[3] Yet we cannot properly assess the desirability of radical life extension without answering the above question about the exact connection between meaning and death, and how we answer it will make a considerable practical difference if meaningfulness is indeed a quality that a life must have in order to be regarded as good and worth living. Arguably a meaningless life is not worth living.

[3] See for instance Harris (2007).

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Consequently, if death does indeed undercut meaning, then it can be plausibly argued that nothing is more urgent than to find a cure against it. If, on the other hand, meaning depends on having a limited human life span, then it seems that there is hardly anything more dangerous for humanity than radical life extension.

Second, radical life extension is central to the human enhancement project, which dominates the direction of technological development in the 21st century and whose main goal it is to increase human freedom and control and thus make human life better (or, which is considered the same, make us happier than it is currently possible for us to be). It is all about overcoming limitations. Death, however, can plausibly be regarded as the ultimate limitation, which explains its centrality to the enhancement project. But if that is so, then the above question about the connection between death and meaning can be given a wider scope covering the entire human enhancement project by rephrasing it as: do our *limitations* (that is, the fact that there are limits to what we can do and be) undercut meaning, or does, on the contrary, meaning depend on those limitations? Currently the debate about the pros and cons of radical human enhancement very much focuses on autonomy, happiness, and the requirements of human nature. This would have to change if meaningfulness could be shown to be an aspect that deserves to be taken seriously in its own right, alongside, or perhaps even trumping, autonomy, happiness and naturalness.

Third, investigating the connection between death and meaning potentially has wide-reaching consequences for the way we frame ethical problems arising from situations in which we have to deal with the dying and the dead, especially if it can be verified that meaningfulness and happiness are quite distinct from each other. The standard theoretical framework used to analyse ethically challenging situations in medicine is formed by the four principles proposed by Beauchamp and Childress (2009), namely autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence and justice. This not only leaves no room for wider considerations relating to the notion of a good life that we seek to address through the concept of 'meaningfulness', but in doing so it also threatens to undermine the very applicability of those principles. What it means not to harm somebody (non-maleficence) and to act in someone's best interest (beneficence) cannot be properly understood independently of what is required to live a meaningful life (or die a meaningful death). Regarding, for instance, the ethical, still hotly debated problem of euthanasia, rather than asking whether people have the right to determine how, and when, they want to live and die (principle of autonomy), it might be more

illuminating to ask how the ability to decide upon the manner and time of one's death contributes to a meaningful life.

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