

Edited by Michael Cholbi  
and Travis Timmerman



# Exploring the Philosophy of Death and Dying

Classical and Contemporary Perspectives



RESOURCES



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*Michael Cholbi and Travis Timmerman*

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# 37 Meaning in Life in Spite of Death

Thaddeus Metz

## I. Death Sucks, but Why, Exactly?

When we suppose that death is truly the end, virtually all of us in the western world<sup>1</sup> wish that neither we nor our loved ones would die. That is, if death essentially involves not merely the permanent disintegration of our bodies, but also of our selves, then pretty much everyone from Euro-American-Australasian cultures thinks that death would be undesirable, except insofar as death would be necessary to prevent a fate worse than it. Unless our only future is torture or some other sort of anguish, most are inclined to think that death is something to fear, hate, avoid, and mourn.

A common explanation of why death is bad for the person who dies is that it often deprives us of the possibility of living well in the future (e.g., Brueckner and Fischer 1986; Kagan 2012: 211–212). On this score, we point out that, say, a middle-aged person who has died will never experience the joy of seeing her daughter get married. Another, less frequent—but nonetheless powerful—explanation of why death is bad for one is that it consists of the permanent annihilation of a person, where a person is highly valuable entity (Benatar 2017). In the way that we have a sense of loss when a great artwork is destroyed in a fire, so we grieve the destruction of a self-aware being with a dignity. Sometimes philosophers and others, some of whom are addressed in this chapter, have a third explanation of why death is dreadful, which is that it renders our lives meaningless. Some contend that life is pointless if it will not continue forever, or, equivalently, that immortality is a necessary condition for a significant existence. The first rationale appeals

to the *quality of life* we could have had, the second roughly invokes the intrinsic value of *human life itself*, while the third employs the concept of a *meaningful life*.

Focusing on the third rationale in this chapter, I argue that death is compatible with meaning. Although one usually has reasons of meaning to want to die much later than the norm for a human being, I contend that there is nothing inherent to life's ending that renders life meaningless.<sup>2</sup> In fact, I provide reason to doubt the view that an immortal life could have a much greater meaning by comparison with any mortal life. If death sucks, it is not because it always makes our lives insignificant, but for some other reason(s).

I begin by clarifying what philosophers tend to mean by speaking of “meaning in life” as a value (Section 2). Next, I expound and object to the position that death is sufficient for a life with no meaning (Section 3), after which I critically address the tempting view that, even if immortality is not necessary for life to be at all meaningful, it is necessary for a life with great meaning (Section 4). I conclude by briefly posing questions that philosophers of life's meaning are just beginning to address and that readers might consider if they want to contribute to the debates (Section 5).

## II. The Value of Meaning in Life

When a philosophical approach to life's meaning comes up in conversation, people usually ask either “So what is the meaning of life (wise guy)?,” or “What (the heck) are you talking about?” Before addressing the first question in the context of whether immortality is central to making life meaningful

(Sections 3 and 4), I here address the second question, about what we invariably have in mind when thinking about life's meaning.

Philosophers in the West disagree about what it means to describe a person's life as "meaningful." However, most currently writing on the topic at least share the view that this term (or a cognate word such as "significant") connotes a cluster of valuable properties such as: making sense of one's life; composing an interesting life story or narrative; living in ways that deserve reactions such as esteem or admiration; realizing purposes that are much higher than animal pleasures; or connecting positively to something beyond oneself. For most philosophers currently addressing life's meaning, when we think or speak about it, we have in mind at least one of these desirable features and quite often more than one as an "amalgam" (e.g., Thomson 2003: 8–13; Metz 2013: 24–35; Mawson 2016; Seachris 2019).

Philosophers also, by and large, agree about exemplars of what lacks meaning in a person's life. None of the following would confer any meaning on your life: chewing gum, taking a hot shower, watching sitcoms while eating ice cream, living the rest of one's life alone in a virtual reality, digging a hole and then filling it up and then digging a hole again and filling it up and so on indefinitely, blowing up the Sphinx for fun, killing one's innocent spouse for the insurance money, hating other people simply because of their race.

*Some* of these actions are worth doing, not because they would make your life more *important*, but perhaps because they would make it happier. If you believe that these actions could confer meaning on your life, then you have to tell a story that invokes some *further* condition, such as helping others or being rewarded for having made a sacrifice. Setting these kinds of conditions aside, the actions are meaningless, for lacking the kinds of valuable properties mentioned above, or so most philosophers believe.

Given the above understanding of what is involved in thinking about the meaning of a person's life, it is unlikely that whatever a person *finds* meaningful or whatever happens to

be "meaningful to" a person is in fact meaningful. Imagine a person found it meaningful to pray to the Flying Spaghetti Monster, a ridiculous creature that does not exist. Or suppose that a person deemed maintaining 3,732 hairs on one's head (Taylor 1992: 36), or "cultivating one's prowess at long-distance spitting or collecting a big ball of string" (Wolf 2010: 104), to be meaningful. These kinds of activities intuitively would *not* merit admiration, would *fail* to make for a good life story, etc. Most contemporary philosophers believe that meaning has an "objective" dimension; that is, we can be mistaken about what does or does not make our lives meaningful, which means that it is sensible to argue about the issue.

### III. Does Meaning Require Immortality?

In this section I critically discuss three arguments that philosophers have advanced for thinking that death would be sufficient for a meaningless life. They are ones that have been particularly influential and should resonate with readers. In catchwords, they appeal to: obtaining justice; making a difference; and enjoying moral freedom.<sup>3</sup> After providing reason to doubt each of these rationales for thinking that meaning requires immortality, I argue directly against that conclusion, presenting reason to believe that a meaningful life is possible even if we all face death.

#### III.1 Obtaining Justice

Harking back some 2500 years to a book in the Hebrew Bible, one encounters the argument that, if everyone dies, then all our lives are meaningless because justice cannot be done. It is particularly prominent in Ecclesiastes, which means those who have gathered together. In this book, the speaker, Koheleth, repeatedly proclaims that "all is vanity," i.e., that everything is in vain or is futile, and that life is akin "to the pursuit of wind." One of his central rationales for this conclusion is that

the same fate is in store for all: for the righteous, and for the wicked; for the good and

pure, and for the impure... That is the sad thing about all that goes on under the sun: that the same fate is in store for all.

(9.2–9.3; see also 2.14–2.16, 3.17)

If everyone dies, then we are saddled with our current lives in which people clearly do not get what they deserve, thereby robbing our lives of meaning (see also Walker 1989; Craig 2000). Life does seem to be nonsensical insofar as the upright, the courageous, the wise, the educated, and the hard-working suffer setbacks, whereas the wicked, the cowardly, the foolish, the ignorant, and the lazy flourish. It is even more absurd when, as Koheleth bemoans (2.12, 2.18–2.21), the latter get to enjoy the goods that the former had labored so hard to produce!

If we would forever survive the deaths of our bodies, then the scales could be rectified. In that case, God, an all-knowing and all-powerful moral judge, could compensate those who unjustly suffered hardships, reward those who had made sacrifices for others, and impose penalties on those who were evil. One could also imagine an impersonal force, akin to *karma* in South and East Asian thought, that would give people what they deserve after their selves have survived the deaths of their bodies.

It is hard to deny that there must be more to this life of ours if justice is going to be done in full. However, why believe that there must be an *eternity* beyond this life? If someone wrongfully breaks my arm, I deserve some compensation, but I do not deserve an infinite amount of it in the form of eternal bliss. In addition, the arm-breaker deserves some punishment, but also not an infinite amount in the form of eternal damnation.

The general point is that finite deeds undertaken on Earth seem to lack any infinite value or disvalue, and that deserved responses to them, i.e., ones that are proportionate or fitting, could also be finite.<sup>4</sup> In order for justice to be done, therefore, we do need more time beyond our 80 or so years as they tend to be on this planet, but we do not need to be immortal. Imagine that the content of

people's minds were uploaded into a computer upon their bodily deaths on Earth and then downloaded into new bodies on another planet. Why wouldn't another few hundred years there suffice to right the wrongs?

Another way to question this argument is to contend that it is precisely the presence of certain kinds of injustice that offers some of us a major opportunity to obtain meaning in our lives. Consider Nelson Mandela, who struggled for some 50 years against racist oppression (apartheid) in South Africa, succeeded in overturning it, and became the country's first democratically elected president. Not too shabby when it comes to meaning, one might suggest. From this perspective, undeserved harm does not render everyone's life unavoidably futile, but rather can be what gives some lives a point.

### III.2 Making a Difference

Perhaps there is some consideration other than justice from which it follows that a meaningful life would have to be immortal. Leo Tolstoy, the famous Russian author of *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, went through an existential crisis that he recounted in his work *My Confession*. Despite his success in terms of creativity, reputation, wealth, and family, he judged that his life would be meaningless if he were to die:

Sooner or later there would come diseases and death (they had come already) to my dear ones and to me, and there would be nothing left but stench and worms. All my affairs, no matter what they might be, would sooner or later be forgotten, and I myself should not exist. So why should I worry about all these things? ... "What is the meaning of my life?"—"None."

(2000: 13, 15; first published in 1884)

Tolstoy's reasoning appears to be that life would be meaningless if nothing were worth doing and that nothing would be worth doing if it would not have an ultimate consequence for, or make a permanent difference to, the



world. Since one could apparently make such an impact only if one's life did not end,<sup>5</sup> this rationale appears to support the idea that one must never die in order for one's existence to matter.

Tolstoy's rationale, articulated in the nineteenth century (but cf. Ecclesiastes 3.18–3.19), continues to have supporters, including William Lane Craig, an influential religious philosopher, who wrote of a mortal existence:

The contributions of the scientist to the advance of human knowledge, the researches of the doctor to alleviate pain and suffering, the efforts of the diplomat to secure peace in the world, the sacrifices of good men everywhere to better the lot of the human race—all these come to nothing. In the end they don't make one bit of difference, not one bit. Each person's life is therefore without ultimate significance.

(2000: 42)

Both Craig and Tolstoy are describing how they think life would be if we could not live forever (not how they believe life actually is).

Here is some reason to doubt that nothing is worth striving for if we are mortal. Imagine that there is a girl near you, say, your much younger sister, and she will get seriously burned if you do not do something to help her. Perhaps she will touch a hot stove, or fall into a bonfire, if you do not warn her or pull her away. And suppose that neither she nor you is destined to live forever. Is there truly no reason at all for you to prevent her from suffering? Would it not be worth making some effort to prevent her from experiencing intense pain and becoming disfigured?

Indeed, some critics try to strengthen the point: perhaps helping others is instead pointless on the supposition that everyone will live forever (Wielenberg 2005: 91–94; Hubin 2009; Maitzen 2009). Imagine that we could not die and that, upon the disintegration of our bodies, our selves would continue to live on in a better place. It is arguably *that* condition that would make it senseless to help anyone. If we cannot perish, then there is

no point in trying to save any of our lives! And if we will go to a better place, say, with God, then there is not even any point in trying to prevent our suffering, since God would be sure to compensate us for it later. By this bold reply, preventing burns, seeking peace, improving people's health, and the like make the most sense if this earthly life is all we have, if it is vulnerable to harm that will never be compensated, if it is delicate and precious. Actions that help mortal beings might not have "ultimate" significance, but nor is it true that "they don't make one bit of difference"; they are plausibly "in between" the extremes, such that they make some difference that has some significance.

### III.3 Enjoying Moral Freedom

Consider now a third argument that philosophers have made for thinking that we must be immortal if our lives are to be at all meaningful. By this approach, we could not have certain mental faculties, which I sum up with "moral freedom," if we did not have an immortal soul. Even if it would be possible (*contra* Descartes) to have a mind that were material, specific kinds of meaningful mental states perhaps would not be. Immanuel Kant maintained, for instance, that if we were physical beings subjected to the laws of nature like everything else in the animal, vegetable, and mineral kingdoms, then we could not act according to reasons, could not be free, and would be incapable of acting morally. Instead, we would be causally necessitated to act at any given time by the prior state of the natural world, widely known as the thesis of "determinism."

For some thinkers, the only way we could transcend the material world and its deterministic causal laws is if we had some spiritual element that is independent of them and stronger than they are, viz., a soul. If our selves were constituted by an immortal, spiritual substance, then we could understand how it is invariably within our power to do the right thing, regardless of what might have happened before to us, where lacking such a

moral freedom would render our lives meaningless. Such a view is suggested in the following passage by a theologian:

The moral spirit finds the meaning of life in choice. It finds it in that which proceeds from man and remains with him as his inner essence rather than in the accidents of circumstance and turns of external fortune... (W)henever a human being rubs the lamp of his moral consciousness with moral passion, a Spirit does appear. This Spirit is God... It is in the "Thou must" of God and man's "I can" that the divine image of God in human life is contained.

(Svenson 2000: 27–28)

The "I can," here, signifies a person's inherent ability to make the morally correct choice in any given situation. If we lacked that power, if it were beyond our control whether we do the right thing or not, then our lives would be senseless, so the argument goes.

One major way that critics have responded to this argument is to explain how the relevant kinds of action would be possible in a purely material world. Philosophers have striven to show that one could indeed act rationally, freely, and morally, in the important senses, if we were a part of nature in the way that everything else on Earth appears to be (e.g., Dennett 1984, 2003). Space precludes recounting these kinds of naturalist explanations, but it is worth keeping in mind how often the scientific method has been able to replace the spiritual with the physical. People used to believe that angels held planets in their orbits and gods were responsible for lightning, but these days cosmologists and meteorologists can identify the physical causes of these events, respectively. Perhaps the kinds of choices that we think make our lives important are analogous to these events, and it is plausible to expect that they too will be shown to have a material basis (if they have not already).

There is another way to criticize the present argument for thinking immortality is essential for meaning. That is to grant, for the

sake of argument, that only a spiritual aspect of us could enable moral freedom, but to question whether it must persist forever in order to do so. Suppose, then, that only something utterly different from the natural world could intervene into it by making a moral choice and thereby changing the course of history. Grant, in particular, that it would have to be a powerful force in order not to be determined by the laws of nature. Even so, there is a gap between that idea and the concept of a soul, as something indestructible or at least destined to persist without end. It seems that a spiritual substance could influence nature without being influenced by it and yet not be the sort of thing that is eternal; just imagine that God were to assign it an expiration date.

Still more, suppose that indeed only an immortal soul could be powerful enough to overcome nature's causal laws. It still would not follow that *you*, as in your particular self, must never die. It is tempting to say that one just is one's soul, but that is a questionable view of personal identity. Normally, the idea is that a soul is an immortal, spiritual substance that contains one's psychological states but that need not; the soul you have could be emptied of any mental states, or it could even be taken over and possessed by someone else, perhaps by a demon. In these latter cases, you arguably would be gone, even though the soul that had once contained your mind were to remain. So, even if an immortal soul had to exist in order for moral freedom to be possible, there is still an argumentative gap to cross, of showing that the soul must forever contain your particular mind, and hence your particular self, as opposed to being either emptied altogether or filled with another personality. Why think that *your identity* must never come to an end in order for you to be able to act freely for a good moral reason while on earth?

There are additional arguments for thinking that life must be meaningless if we are not immortal (see note 3), but, rather than consider them here, I will now provide reason to doubt their conclusion. Here is an argument for

thinking that, even if we are mortal, a meaningful life is possible, at least for many of us.

If we think of the (stereotypical) lives of Mother Teresa, Nelson Mandela, Albert Einstein, Charles Darwin, John Coltrane, and Pablo Picasso, they seem meaningful in virtue of the activities they performed, even upon imagining that they did not survive the deaths of their bodies (Baier 1997; Trisel 2004: 384–385; Wielenberg 2005: 31–37, 49–50; Norman 2006). Supposing for the sake of argument that none of these people exists any longer, most of us remain inclined to differentiate their lives, which exemplify morality, enquiry, or creativity (respectively), on the one hand, from lives devoted to long-distance spitting, creating a big ball of string, or living alone in a virtual reality, on the other. Meaning is present in the former cases, and absent in the latter ones. Reflection on the lives of those mentioned above indicates that we need not be immortal in order to realize ends higher than pleasure, to live in ways that merit admiration, or to lead a life story that is compelling.

It is not just that some little bit of meaning is available to mortal human beings, but that there is arguably enough available for some people to be aptly described as having lived “meaningful lives” on balance. Nobody’s perfect. Einstein apparently held some prejudicial views in respect of Chinese people, Mother Teresa was reportedly stingy with painkiller, and Picasso is said to have repeatedly cheated on his lovers. Even so, all things considered, their contributions to the true (knowledge), the good (beneficence), and the beautiful (art), respectively, were so substantial as to make it plausible to describe their lives as “meaningful.” And if they could achieve that, why can’t we do something similar (even if not quite as grand)? Rather than sleep in or watch sitcoms, we could get an education, become wiser, work for a charity, rear children with love, cultivate a garden, or write poetry.<sup>6</sup>

This reasoning has convinced even many religiously inclined theorists of meaning. For example, one has said that it is “beyond reasonable doubt” that some meaning would be possible even if there were no soul (Quinn

2000: 58), while another remarks that it would be “incredible” (Audi 2005: 334) to think that no meaning would accrue from beneficent relationships in themselves (see also Cottingham 2003: 76–79; Mawson 2016: 5). There are some, perhaps Craig cited above, who will deny the intuition that Einstein’s life mattered, on the supposition that Einstein is not in Heaven. However, the much more common reply these days from friends of immortality is to grant that it is not necessary for a life to be meaningful, but to contend that it is necessary for a *great* meaning in life.

#### IV. Does Great Meaning Require Immortality?

Among twenty-first-century philosophers of life’s meaning, a large majority believe that a mortal and meaningful life is possible. However, there is still real debate to be had between those who believe that death is incompatible with meaning in some way and those who do not. Most of the debate is now about whether immortality would alone offer us a *greater* meaning than one available to a mortal life. After spelling out why some philosophers have thought that an eternal life could exhibit an ultimate meaning and a finite life could not, I aim to contribute to the debate by posing a problem for this position that needs to be addressed.

Although philosophers these days often speak of a “great” or “ultimate” meaning, they have not been clear and specific about what these terms mean. On the one hand, they might be making a quantitative claim, that we could have much more, perhaps an infinite amount, of meaning if we lived forever. On the other hand, they could be making a qualitative claim, that a higher type of meaning is alone available to an immortal life. In the following passage from a recent book on the meaning of life, T.J. Mawson mentions both in discussing what a world without a spiritual dimension could offer us:

(I)t might well be true that Gandhi’s life is more meaningful than that of the wastrel even

if there is no God. But, if there is no God, then there's some deeper or more permanent sort of meaning that even Gandhi's life lacked because *all* our lives lack it.

(2016: 5; see also 17, as well as Cottingham 2016; Swinburne 2016)

In a world without God—which, for Mawson, is also a world without a soul—we could not have a meaning that is “deep” or “permanent,” as opposed to a “shallow or transient meaning” (Mawson 2016: 5), where a permanent meaning would presumably constitute a much larger amount than a transient one.

Indeed, Mawson contends that only an eternal life would have a potentially “infinite” amount of meaning (2016: 145). Suppose, as seems true, that meaningful actions or states have some kind of magnitude, i.e., come in degrees. For instance, helping an old lady cross the street would be meaningful, while liberating an entire country without much violence and destruction would be even more meaningful. We might not be able to assign specific numbers to meaningful conditions, but we nonetheless often have some rough idea of how to compare them. If so, then the amount of meaning available to an eternal life is potentially infinite, whereas that available to a finite life is not.

The argument is strong, but the problem is that it might “prove too much,” as philosophers sometimes say. Recall that, in this section, we are evaluating the position that grants that a mortal and meaningful life is possible, but contends that an immortal life could alone have a great meaning by comparison. The trouble with the present rationale is that an infinite meaning would dwarf a finite meaning to such an extent that we could no longer plausibly describe the latter life as “meaningful” on balance. It would be like saying that a house can be big, even if it would be bigger were it to grow to be the size of a billion billion billion suns.<sup>7</sup>

To be sure, by the present reasoning, Gandhi's life would not be a “flat zero,” but it would, compared to infinity, come about as close to zero as is mathematically possible for

a non-zero number, and that arguably fails to capture the judgment that Gandhi's life was meaningful on balance absent a soul. Just as we would not describe someone's life as “happy” if it had only a smidge of happiness compared to what is frequently on offer, so we cannot plausibly describe someone's mortal life as “meaningful” if it has only a “small dollop” of meaning compared to infinity, “tending to nothing over time” (Mawson 2016: 144; see also 13, 154). Given the argument at the end of the previous section, approximating zero is not an accurate way to capture the lives of Mandela, Einstein, Picasso, and the like, or so I put forth for consideration.

## V. Conclusion

The argument that an immortal life would have “too much” meaning, rendering us unable to capture the intuition that our mortal lives are capable of being meaningful, is not put forward as conclusive. It is only recently that philosophers have begun to consider a great, ultimate, or infinite meaning purportedly unavailable to persons who will die. As this sort of debate has just begun, many questions remain open for philosophers and their students to address, including: is it, upon reflection, coherent to describe a mortal Gandhi's life as “meaningful” compared to a life with an infinite amount of meaning?; might an eternal life not necessarily exhibit an infinite meaning, but rather a finite amount that would not render a mortal life more or less meaningless?; how else, besides quantitatively, might we understand the sense of “great” meaning that an immortal life would alone offer? For instance, a deep meaning sounds better than a shallow one, but what makes something a deep sort of meaning? May readers be moved to put their minds to these and related questions.

## Notes

1. The qualification is important, as there are other traditions that do not seem to value being a distinct self, with the Hindu religion particularly salient.

2. I set aside the metaphysical issue of whether we are in fact immortal or not, and focus solely on how immortality or its absence would bear on the meaning in our lives.
3. Another argument that has been advanced is that meaning in life is a function of the maximally possible value for us, which would consist of a perfect relationship with a perfect being, i.e., God's pleasing us forever in Heaven (cf. Goetz 2012; Metz 2013: 106–138). Why think that anything less than perfect must be disqualified as a source of some meaning in life? (on which see Landau 2017).
4. You might be tempted to suggest that at least a mass murderer deserves eternal damnation, but that does not seem true, since if we all are immortal, then no one can ever be *killed!*
5. For doubt about this claim, see Metz (2013: 129).
6. Even if a mortal and meaningful life is possible, we usually (on grounds of meaning) have good reason to want to put death off for a long while beyond our expected 80 or so years, so that we can pursue all the more knowledge of ourselves and our world, intensify our relationships with persons and certain kinds of animals, create even better works of art, share them with others, and so on.
7. I first made this point in Metz (2017: 367), from which some of this phrasing is cribbed.

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