**Out of the Blue into the Black**

**Reflections on Death and Meaning**

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*Abstract*: In this chapter, Michael Hauskeller argues that contrary to a common intuition, our mortality - the fact that we have to die - does not in any way compromise our ability to live a meaningful life and to do things that matter. Neither the repetitiveness nor the apparent futility of our actions, nor their cosmic insignificance, robs our lives of meaning.

*Keywords*: death, mortality, immortality, meaning.

*Out of the blue, into the black,*

*Once you’re gone, you can’t come back*

Neil Young

*Much Ado about Nothing?*

Few of us are entirely comfortable with the prospect of our own death, including those who believe in an after-life. Whatever we may *believe*, as far as we *know*, death is going to end our existence, and our own non-existence is not only very hard to fathom (‘How could *I*, the subjective centre of the world, ever *not* be, especially if the world continues to exist?’), but we also instinctively shy away from it and often fear it like nothing else. This may well be irrational, as Epicurus argued, because it seems impossible that our own death can be bad for us (or more precisely, that our *being* dead can be bad for us), but that does not necessarily stop us from fearing it. Yet even if we are largely indifferent to our future non-existence, we may still be affected in other ways by the knowledge of our mortality. We may for instance wonder what the point of all our striving and caring is if whatever we do the outcome will always be the same: our life will end, and all we have built, all we have ever accomplished, all our knowledge and experience, all we have ever done or been, will end as well, perhaps not immediately, but eventually. If that is so, then why bother with any of it in the first place?

This is not a purely academic question. People can be seriously thrown off course by it. One well-known example is the great Russian writer Leo Tolstoy who, when he was forty years old, fell into a deep depression when contemplating the fact of his mortality. Death is the ultimate reality, he felt, and for that reason life could only ever be a “stupid and evil joke” (Tolstoy 1882, 20). “Today or tomorrow”, he writes in his *Confession*, “sickness and death will come (…) to those dear to me, and to myself, and nothing will remain other than the stench and the worms. Sooner or later my deeds, whatever they may have been, will be forgotten and will no longer exist. What is all the fuss about then? How can a person carry on living and fail to perceive this? That is what is so astonishing! It is only possible to go on living while you are intoxicated with life, once sober it is impossible not to see that it is all a mere trick, and a stupid trick!” (Tolstoy 1882, 21)

Tolstoy felt very strongly that if we seriously contemplate the reality of death, which few of us ever do while are still fit and healthy, preferring to pretend that death is still far away or only comes for other people, we must come to the conclusion that none of what we do really matters, that “all the fuss”, as he puts it, is ultimately about nothing at all. Whatever it is, we could just as well not do it because in the long run it won’t make any difference anyway.

*Universal Mortality*

Now if that is true, our situation is truly hopeless because it is an undeniable fact that we are *all* going to die (whatever happens after), some sooner, some later, but without exception. For all we know, our death is the end for us, and nothing lasts forever, perhaps not even the universe itself. Consequently, we may be able to delay our death, but whatever we do we will not escape it. Even if we managed to figure out how to stop the aging process, as some biogerontologists believe we will soon be able to (e.g. de Grey 2008), we could still be certain that someday, however far in the future that day may be, *something* will kill us. Even if we found a way to exchange our carbon-based bodies for something more durable, or to upload our minds and selves to a computer and henceforth live a bodiless, virtual existence, largely unburdened by material constraints, we would still remain unable to survive forever: even such an existence would come to an end if its physical conditions are removed or destroyed, which is bound to happen eventually.

Radical life extension would, therefore, not solve the problem, which appears to be not that we die too early, but that we die at all. If the fact that we have to die makes it impossible for us to live a meaningful life, then a meaningful life is not possible for the simple reason that it is not possible *never* to die. All things that have a beginning in time also have an end in time. Accordingly, if a mortal life can never be meaningful, nobody will ever have lived a meaningful life, neither in the past nor in the future: not you or me, not Socrates, Picasso or Einstein, not Mother Teresa or Nelson Mandela. All lives, then, are equally pointless, equally meaningless.

But *why* would that be so? What are the reasons that lead people to believe that death, or the fact of our mortality, deprive our lives of meaning? What would be different if we no longer had to die at some point, or if at least our actions and achievements had a lasting effect on the history of a never-ending universe? - Let us suppose our life never ended. Whatever happened, to Earth, to the solar system, to the universe, our existence would not be affected by it. In that case we would have all the time in the world: we would never run short of it. Naturally, there would still be things that we could not do, but never because of a lack of time. We could be very patient and bide our time, doing nothing much at all for as long as we feel like it, then spend hundreds of years on perfecting a skill and the next few hundred years on learning and perfecting a different one. We could make plans that require thousands of years for their execution and yet still be around to see them come to fruition. We could see not only our children grow up, but also our grandchildren and great-grandchildren, as well as *their* children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren (provided people would still reproduce, which might no longer be considered necessary or expedient). If other people were immortal too, we could spend literally an eternity with the ones we love, or if that is not what we want, we could instead have, successively, an infinite number of partners, lovers, and friends to enjoy life with. We would of course still have to decide what to do *now*, but many of the things that we decide *not* do now we could still do at some time in the future because it would never really be too late for anything.

*The Life of Sisyphus*

Would such an immortal life be better than the mortal one we have now? Sure enough it would allow us to do things that we cannot do now, things that require more time than we currently have. So in *that* respect an immortal life would be better. (Note, however, that there may well be *other* respects in which such a life would be worse.) Would it also be more *meaningful* in the sense that it would be *less pointless* and that the things we do would *matter* more? To answer this question, let us take a look at what is often seen as the “perfect image of meaninglessness” (Taylor 1970, 20): the myth of Sisyphus. Because he deemed himself smarter than the gods, Sisyphus was condemned to push a large boulder up a hill, and to do so for all eternity, for the boulder, whenever Sisyphus reaches the top of his hill, inevitably rolls back down, so that he keeps having to start all over again. There is no hope that he will ever accomplish his task, and giving up is not an option. The relentless repetition that is his life will therefore never end.

Now if this is indeed a perfect image of meaninglessness, then we should expect that it throws into sharp relief the key features of a life lacking in meaning. There are three aspects of the situation that stand out. The first is the very *repetitiveness* of the action performed. Sisyphus does the same thing over and over again. There is no variation: take the boulder, push it up the hill, watch it roll down again, go after it, repeat. Then there is, secondly, the apparent *futility* of Sisyphus’s laboring. It looks as if what Sisyphus intends to do is get the boulder up the hill. Since this intention is thwarted each and every time he tries it, nothing ever comes off what he is doing: he does not really *accomplish* anything, or so it may seem. Finally – and that is an aspect often overlooked – Sisyphus has to perform this repetitive fruitless task *for all eternity*. Clearly, this does not make things any better for Sisyphus. If anything, the fact that his meaningless life will never end makes matters worse for him. It is what makes his punishment so very cruel and hard to bear in the first place. Perhaps it does not exactly make his life more *meaningless*, but it certainly does not make it any *less* meaningless either. We can therefore conclude that an immortal life is not necessarily more meaningful than a mortal life. It seems that whether or not it is would very much depend on what that life is like. If it is very repetitive and never goes anywhere and if being so makes a mortal life meaningless, then an immortal life that has the same features is equally meaningless.

This does not necessarily mean that our having to die in no way affects our ability to live a meaningful life. It is theoretically possible that while even an immortal life *can* be meaningless, it does not *have* to be, whereas a mortal life is *always* meaningless, simply by virtue of being mortal. If mortal lives are necessarily repetitive and not leading anywhere, whereas immortal lives are *not* necessarily repetitive and may indeed lead somewhere, then only an immortal life can be meaningful.

*Repetition*

Now it is no doubt true that our mortal lives do seem rather repetitive. Like all living beings we tend to do the same things over and over again. Our days strongly resemble each other. We get up, use the bathroom, have breakfast, go to work, come home, eat, sleep, and then we do it again the following day. Our life as a whole is equally predictable in its overall trajectory. We get born, grow up, find a job, a hobby, fall in love, marry, (fall in love again, remarry,) have children, get old, retire, and die. And our children will do the same, as will their children after them, and so on, ad infinitum. There is some variation in the detail, of course, but in terms of their general features most human lives are pretty much alike. For one thing, they are characterized by endless repetitions, and for another, they do not really lead anywhere, except to death. Our lives therefore seem, overall, just as pointless as the life of Sisyphus.

And yet, if we believe that this kind of repetitiveness stands in the way of our living a meaningful life, it is difficult to see how we can escape it by not dying. We would still have to get up in the morning and do various things that are necessary to keep us functional, and we would still be limited in the *kind* of things that we could do. In fact, the more time we have at our disposal the more likely it is that we will have to repeat at some point what we did before. An endless life in a finite world is necessarily a life of endless repetitions. And the kind of *variation* that an endless life promises, we can also have in a mortal life if we choose to. We can find a new job every few years, travel the world, change partners frequently, pick up new hobbies, pursue them for a while, and then drop them again, deliberately change our habits after some time or, even better, try not to develop any in the first place, be open to new experiences, be unpredictable, be unreliable. Since such a life would be far less repetitive, it should also, if repetition is indeed the problem, be more meaningful. It is, however, far from obvious that this would be the case.

It has been argued that repetition is bad for us because it “adds nothing in and of itself to lifetime welfare” and that what we need in order to add meaning to our life are, therefore, “new kinds of momentary benefits – for example, qualitatively new pleasures, new kinds of aesthetic experiences, different or deeper insights into the nature of things, etc.” (Bramble 2015, 455). And yet, while it is true that too much repetition can easily be experienced as stifling, and a life that consists in nothing more than doing one and the same thing over and over and over again, like that of Sisyphus, can hardly be seen as meaningful, *too much change and variety* can be equally detrimental to meaning. As the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard pointed out, meaning can be found in repetition, and even thrive in it. For Kierkegaard, it is precisely our willingness to embrace repetition that distinguishes the ethical life from (what he calls) the (merely) aesthetic life, which is a life devoted to the passions and the pleasures of the senses. The ethical life is preferable because it is more authentic: it allows us be ourselves. Because, living ethically, we always have a hold in ourselves, we do not permanently have to chase the new to keep us entertained and hold boredom (and the emptiness of our lives that it reveals) at bay. We make our choices and we stand by them. This naturally leads to some repetition in our lives (which is, aesthetically speaking, the enemy of passion). Yet while the aesthetic self cannot endure repetition, the ethical self thrives off it and positively embraces it. “He who chooses repetition, he lives. He does not chase after butterflies like a child, or stand on tiptoe in order to glimpse the wonders of the world. He knows them. (…) He goes calmly about his life, happy in repetition.” (Kierkegaard 1843, 4)

In truth, repetition contributes to a meaningful life just as much as variation does. Think of the seasons, think of our annual celebrations and family gatherings. Think of the pieces of music and the books that we return to throughout our lives, the food that reminds us of our childhood. They do not become less meaningful because they return, on the contrary. They gain their meaning through the repetition. Why would things have to change constantly to add meaning to our life? The aesthetic chase for the ever-new does not make our life more meaningful. It is true that crises of meaning can result from a lack of newness in our lives, but they can also arise from an inability to appreciate the familiar pleasures and similar kinds of experience. They can result from a restlessness that propels us ever forward and actually prevents us from deepening our understanding of the world (simply broadening it instead) and, perhaps most importantly, from ever feeling truly at home in the world.

*Futility*

Where does this leave us? We have seen that a mortal life is not necessarily less meaningful than an immortal one, and that *if* it is, then it must be for some other reason than that it will end someday. Yet we have also seen that repetition is not altogether bad and does not have to undermine the meaningfulness of our lives either. But there is only one other feature we have so far identified that looks as if it could prevent our mortal lives from being meaningful, namely the ultimate futility of everything we do. Sisyphus works so hard to get his boulder up to the top of the hill, and it is all in vain; he never achieves his goal or for that matter makes any real progress. He may manage to get his boulder half way up the hill, but he will soon be at the bottom again. Our own lives, however, are actually very similar, or so it may appear to us. That is what Tolstoy seems to have felt: that because in the long run nothing we do has any lasting effects on anything (even if what we do is write wonderful novels like he did or perform some other great deed, all of which will also be forgotten one day), because we always end up at the bottom again (said bottom being death and annihilation), and so does everything we have touched in our life, there seems to be no point in putting any effort into it. Why bother if whatever we do, whatever we achieve, whatever we change, whatever good we may bring about, will, in the long run, not have made any difference whatsoever. It would seem then that no matter what we do we could just as well not do it.

This worry obviously concerns not so much our own death, but rather the fact that, inevitably, even the things we have accomplished will disappear one day. It is the end of everything that results from our actions rather than our own personal end that seems to stand in the way of meaning here. This extended form of death is what makes our efforts futile. Our lives may have consequences that reach far beyond our individual demise, but they too will end one day, and at that point nothing we have ever done will matter anymore. In this sense what we do now is futile, and clearly we don’t want our actions to be futile. Ideally, we want them to make a lasting impact. Without such an impact there does not seem to be much point in living.

Joshua W. Seachris calls this intuition the staying-power intuition (SPI), which he defines as the idea that, all else being equal, things that are worthwhile, significant, or meaningful last. (Seachris 2011, 461) Actions that have no lasting consequences we call futile. Deep or cosmic futility is the futility that results from the presumed fact that, because of the way the world works, there is ultimately nothing that has any lasting consequences. But why do we have this intuition in the first place: that only what lasts is meaningful? Seachris argues that the naturalistic assumption that we are making when we consider the meaning of our lives threatened or undermined by the way we think the world is going to end can and should be understood as a narrative or “meta-narrative”. In narratives, it always matters how they end. When we assess a story – emotionally, morally, aesthetically – the ending is particularly relevant. It not only matters to us what happens at the end, but also that it happens *at the end*. A bad ending is bad, just as a bad beginning is bad, but a bad ending is much worse than a bad beginning, precisely because it is a bad ending. A lot of sad things can happen in the course of a narrative, but they don’t necessarily make the story as a whole a sad one. Yet a sad ending always makes for a sad story, and a happy ending for a happy story. Cosmic futility is a threat because we look at life as a whole from a narrative perspective. If we didn’t – if we didn’t care so much about how things end -, we would not feel that our lives can be rendered worthless by what happens or does not happen in the far future of the world, seemingly nullifying all the good things that are actually happening in the present, all our accomplishments and achievements.

Yet even if Seachris is right and we do have such a deeply ingrained narrative bias that makes us root for happy endings, which would explain why it matters to us how the things we have set in motion end, it would still be odd if the only possible happy ending were no ending at all. There must be a way for the ending of a life well-lived to be a *happy* ending and to still be an *ending*. Similarly, when the good consequences that my life may have had, my legacy as it were, finally come to an end, years, decades, or centuries after my death, their ending does not necessarily have to be an unhappy one. We should remember here that whatever happens in the future, none of it can affect what has already happened. What we have accomplished, we have accomplished. If we have changed the world for the better, we have changed it for the better, even it lasted only for a while, because for a while it really *was* better. Nothing is going to change that. Happy moments will still be happy moments even if they don’t last, and they will forever remain happy moments. The past is what it is. It cannot be changed by the future.

All this suggests that for our actions to be futile it is not sufficient that they have no lasting consequences. A lot depends on whether we *want* them to be lasting and *how* lasting we want them to be. Generally speaking, futile is an action whose intended goal is not accomplished. Accordingly, we cannot judge whether an action is futile or not if we don’t know what goal it was intended to accomplish. If what I intend to accomplish by doing something is completely unrelated to the eventual fate of the universe, then what I am doing is not rendered futile by said fate. If I study hard to become, say, a decent philosopher, and I then, as a result, manage to become exactly that, then my labors have *not* been futile even if I eventually die or even if the whole solar system will perish in a few billion years, because that has got nothing to do with what I have or have not accomplished it. Accordingly, we would only have reason to regard our actions as futile in light of the inevitable future destruction of our solar system, if we had a deep desire that what we do now will have an impact far beyond our own life span and even beyond the life span of our solar system. This, however, is rather unlikely. We may have some desire to be remembered after our death, mostly by our loved ones, and perhaps by others, for a while at least. But we don’t usually have a deep desire to still have an impact on things a few billion years from now, and it would be a very odd desire to have indeed.

Even if our desires are more far-reaching, more world-changing in their ambition, we would (and perhaps, if we are wise, should) not seriously expect or even hope to make an everlasting impact. Let us suppose you could make the world a better place in some way, and you also desire to do so, but that at the same time you are aware that it is not going to last. The world will only be better for a decade or two and then revert to its previous, less desirable state. Would your plan, in that case, not be worth pursuing at all? No doubt, it would certainly be better if the world *remained* a better place, and the longer it remained a better place the better it would be, but it doesn’t follow from this that being a better place only for a while is not better than never to have been a better place at all. There is no good reason to suppose that our inability to ensure that a particular state of affairs lasts forever makes it pointless to bring about this state of affairs in the first place.

*Ultimate Significance*

So what have we learned so far? We saw earlier that an immortal life can be just as repetitive as a mortal one, if not more so. We also saw that repetition does not necessarily stand in the way of meaning. Futility on the other hand does seem to threaten the meaningfulness of what we do. However, what is often *taken* for futility, namely the fact that *in the very long run* nothing we do is likely to make much of a difference, is either not futility at all or not the kind of futility that can plausibly be said to undermine meaning. What may conceivably do that is the futility of an action that fails to achieve its purpose. Yet the fact that we have to die does not prevent us from achieving our purposes, unless our purposes are unreasonably ambitious. It is true that our life will be cut off at some point and in that sense does not lead anywhere beyond that point. Yet what we do in life does in fact lead to many things *in* life. Why should it have to lead to something that is no longer part of our life? As Thomas Nagel (1971) has argued, the chain of justifications (‘I do this in order to achieve that’) needs to come to an end somewhere, and there is no reason to think that it cannot be just as meaningful if it comes to an end within our given life span.

It has been argued, however, that in order to be meaningful our life also needs to have *ultimate significance*, and that a mortal life can never have that, no matter what it is like in other respects. What we need to lead a meaningful life is in fact the kind of immortality that only God can give us. “If there is no God”, writes William Lane Craig, “then man’s life becomes absurd” (Craig 1994, 40) precisely because if there is no God, then death is real, both for us and for everything else, including the universe itself, which is a horrible prospect. Without God there is no immortality for us, and without immortality no ultimate significance, because all the significance a mortal life can ever have is merely relative. What we do is relatively significant if it impacts on other events. But if the changes we bring about do *not change the final destiny of the universe* (because whatever we do, things will cease to exist someday), then they have no ultimate significance. Whatever we accomplish in life is then “utterly meaningless”: “This is the horror of modern man: because he ends in nothing, he is nothing.” (Craig 1994, 42) Clearly, though, more is needed for ultimate significance than just immortality. We could live forever and still be nothing in the sense that our existence still does not impact in any way on the final destiny of the universe. That is why God is needed who alone can make sure that we have a seat at the table that determines the universe’s destiny. But then again, it seems strange and rather implausible to say that because we *end* in nothing, we *are* nothing. Why should only the eternal, the never-ending, count as *something*? This (essentially Platonic) assumption is especially implausible since all the somethings we have ever encountered and are ever likely to encounter are finite. As far as we know, everything that exists started to exist one day and will one day cease to exist. Out of the blue, into the black, this is our lot. This is what ‘being something’ means: being something *in* time and therefore *for* a time. What is absurd is to expect and desire more than that. What makes our lives meaningful is not what comes of them (or *that* something comes of them), but the fact that we deeply care about what we do, that we are emotionally involved in our lives. The things we do are important to us, and that is enough to make our lives meaningful, even if nothing that we do actually leads anywhere (at least to nothing permanent, nothing that will stay). What matters not only in the first instance but *ultimately*, is that there are things that matter to *us*: “things worth achieving, doing or having, (…) things that bring joy, understanding, exhilaration or contentment to ourselves or to others” (Nielsen 1978, 157). That we cannot have those things forever does not in any way diminish their worth.

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