

QUOTES FROM THOMAS NAGEL MORTAL QUESTIONS AND MY COMMENTS

The noted American philosopher, Thomas Nagel was born in 1937. He was University Professor of Philosophy and Law at New York University. He wrote books such as *A Very Short Introduction to Philosophy*, *The Possibility of Altruism* and the book we are considering now *Mortal Questions*.

One of his famous sayings was, "Trust problems over solutions". The reason is that, "Simplicity and elegance are never reasons to think that a philosophical theory is true: on the contrary, they are usually grounds for thinking it false".

To religion that is a warning for it claims to give metaphysical and ethical answers. It claims to show that the problem of God and evil is not a true problem.

Alarmingly he writes, "Given the limitations on human action, it is naïve to suppose that there is a solution to every moral problem to which the world can face us. We have always known that the world is a bad place. It appears that it may be an evil place as well."

Thus we would be asked to assume that religious suicide bombers are in fact just responding to the fact that doing right or what you think is right is not always a beautiful thing - it messy, frightening and dangerous.

This book contains some of Nagel's most interesting essays, and will be very helpful for anyone studying his philosophy.

QUOTE: "If death is an evil at all, it cannot be because of its positive features, but only because of what it deprives us of. I shall try to deal with the difficulties surrounding the natural view that death is an evil because it brings to an end all the goods that life contains. We need not give an account of these goods here, except to observe that some of them, like perception, desire, activity, and thought, are so general as to be constitutive of human life. They are widely regarded as formidable benefits in themselves, despite the fact that they are conditions of misery as well as of happiness, and that a sufficient quantity of more particular evils can perhaps outweigh them."

COMMENT: Death has benefits but deprives us of things that can easily be as bad for us as good for us. Wealth is a torment if you don't have the health to enjoy it. The soul in religious systems is seen as a something related to conscious activity so if activity does not end at death then death is not death!

QUOTE: "Kant believed that good or bad luck should influence neither our moral judgment of a person and his actions, nor his moral assessment of himself. The good will is not good because of what it effects or accomplishes or because of its adequacy to achieve some proposed end; it is good only because of its willing, i.e., it is good of itself."

COMMENT: You cannot accuse a person of acting in bad faith if their actions harm for it can happen that good can happen as well. Luck decides if a vote for euthanasia actually ends up making people refuse to use a euthanasia service. A choice is more important than what it is made for. Choice "would sparkle like a jewel in its own right, as something that had its full worth in itself. Usefulness or fruitlessness can neither diminish nor augment this worth."

QUOTE: "If one negligently leaves the bath running with the baby in it, one will realize, as one bounds up the stairs toward the bathroom, room, that if the baby has drowned one has done something awful, whereas if it has not one has merely been careless. Someone who launches a violent revolution against an authoritarian regime knows that if he fails he will be responsible for much suffering that is in vain, but if he succeeds he will be justified by the outcome."

COMMENT: This shows that whether Kant is right or wrong how we think about choice. It is a sort of lie to pretend that a mistake is only terrible and morally intolerable if by luck it leads to something heinous. Adultery is condemned for it can be followed by bad things. The bad things are not the reason it is wrong but show it is wrong. But if luck has a hand that logic is wrong. Only a command can make adultery bad.

QUOTE: "One may want to have a generous spirit, or regret not having one, but it makes no sense to condemn oneself or anyone else for a quality which is not within the control of the will. Condemnation implies that you should not be like that, not that it is unfortunate that you are."

COMMENT: That is true if there are people who cannot cultivate a kindly outlook and manner. It is obvious that if you are hard like that that you cannot just soften. It could take ages. Morality exists for condemning traits in us that lead to the harm of others but it is no good when it cannot condemn most badness in us. It is unfair to condemn the thief for at this moment in time he cannot change the past choices that made him a thief and it cannot change now in an instant. Morality

then even if it should not be its only weapon and proves that those who say they love criminals and sinners in fact do not. They are liars and they are no inspiration to those who want to change. They hinder more than they will ever know.

QUOTE: "Moral judgment of a person is judgment not of what happens to him, but of him. It does not say merely that a certain event or state of affairs is fortunate or unfortunate or even terrible. It is not an evaluation of a state of the world, or of an individual as part of the world. We are not thinking just that it would be better if he were different, or did not exist, or had not done some of the things he has done. We are judging him, rather than his existence or characteristics. The effect of concentrating on the influence of what is not under his control is to make this responsible self seem to disappear, swallowed up by the order of mere events."

COMMENT: A clear rebuttal to those who say people are good but it is their circumstances that make them harm. And it makes liars of Christians who say they never judge sinners but only the sins. The sinner is the sin and to condemn theft or homosexuality or murder is to condemn the people who do them. The Book of Revelation speaks of Lie and Death going to burn in the eternal furnace. It means liars and murderers.

A judgement of the person is intended to give the person the experience of condemnation - so they are condemned that way and condemned as being assessed as bad and worthy of condemnation. There are two prongs to condemnation. You are not condemning the bad impulse in a person. Thinking is an action so you are not condemning the thinking that leads to harm. You are not condemning the free will that makes the harm. You are condemning the person.

QUOTE: "An account of absolutism - if it is not allowable to do certain things, such as killing unarmed prisoners or civilians, then no argument about what will happen if one does not do them can show that doing them would be all right. Absolutism does not, of course, require one to ignore the consequences of one's acts. It operates as a limitation on utilitarian reasoning, not as a substitute for it. An absolutist can be expected to try to maximize good and minimize evil."

COMMENT: To avoid confusion, the absolutist says do try to create good results for people but don't do it at the cost of murder, adultery, theft, godlessness etc. The utilitarian knows no such limit. A person may be killed to save more lives as if you can measure the value of human life. A person may be killed if it makes enough people happy enough for long enough.

QUOTE: Sometimes - the only way to control a campaign of terrorism is to to employ terrorist tactics against the community from which it has arisen. Whatever one does in cases such as these, some innocent people will die as a result. If the absolutist prohibition forbade doing what would result in the deaths of innocent people, it would have the consequence that in such cases nothing one could do would be morally permissible. This problem is avoided, however, because what absolutism forbids is doing certain things to people, rather than bringing about certain results. Not everything that happens to others as a result of what one does is something that one has done to them. Catholic moral theology seeks to make this distinction precise in a doctrine known as the law of double effect, which asserts that there is a morally relevant distinction between bringing about or permitting the death of an innocent person deliberately, either as an end in itself or as a means, and bringing it about or permitting it as a side effect of something else one does deliberately. In the latter case, even if the outcome is foreseen, it is not murder, and does not fall under the absolute prohibition, though of course it may still be wrong for other reasons (reasons of utility, for example). Briefly, the principle states that one is sometimes permitted knowingly to bring about or permit as a side-effect of one's actions something which it would be absolutely impermissible to bring about or permit deliberately as an end or as a means. In application to war or revolution, the law of double effect permits a certain amount of civilian carnage as a side-effect of bombing.

COMMENT: It is said that if you hit a child you are the one that carries the mark forever of what you have done and what you are capable of while the child can forget. Double-effect cannot stop a soul becoming black.

QUOTE: It might be thought easy to dismiss this as sophistry: if one bombs, burns, or strafes a village containing a hundred people, twenty of whom one believes to be guerrillas, so that by killing most of them one will be statistically likely to kill most of the guerrillas, then is not one's attack on the group of one hundred a means of destroying the guerrillas, pure and simple? If one makes no attempt to discriminate between guerrillas and civilians, as is impossible in an aerial attack on a small village, then one cannot regard as a mere side-effect the deaths of those in the group that one would not have bothered to kill if more selective means had been available. The difficulty is that this argument depends on one particular description of the act, and the reply might be that the means used against the guerrillas is not: killing everybody in the village - but rather: obliteration bombing of the area in which the twenty guerrillas are known to be located. If there are civilians in the area as well, they will be killed as a side-effect of such action.

COMMENT: Scary!

QUOTE: The absolutist focus on actions rather than outcomes does not merely introduce a new, outstanding item into the catalogue of evils. That is, it does not say that the worst thing in the world is the deliberate murder of an innocent person. For if that were all, then one could presumably justify one such murder on the ground that it would prevent several others, or ten thousand on the ground that they would prevent a hundred thousand more. That is a familiar argument. But if this is

allowable, then there is no absolute prohibition against murder after all. Absolutism requires that we avoid murder at all costs, not that we prevent it at all costs.

COMMENT: In reality, a dead body is still there at the end. Absolutism asks that you do not kill but you let others kill at least in certain circumstances. This is really about sacrificing others in the name of righteousness so you can be "righteous". This is moral selfishness. Nagel calls it moral self-interest.

QUOTE: There are two confusions behind the view that moral self-interest underlies moral absolutism. First, it is a confusion to suggest that the need to preserve one's moral purity might be the source of an obligation. For if by committing murder one sacrifices one's moral purity or integrity, that can only be because there is already something wrong with murder. The general reason against committing murder cannot therefore be merely that it makes one an immoral person. Secondly, the notion that one might sacrifice one's moral integrity justifiably, in the service of a sufficiently worthy end, is an incoherent notion. For if one were justified in making such a sacrifice (or even morally required to make it), then one would not be sacrificing one's moral integrity by adopting that course: one would be preserving it. Moral absolutism is not unique among moral theories in requiring each person to do what will preserve his own moral purity in all circumstances.

COMMENT: In other words, you cannot choose a course just because the course will show you as morally pure but if you follow any ethical theory and apply it you can only do so if you are morally pure. If you want to be honest, that does not make stealing wrong. Stealing is wrong and it has nothing to do with what you need or want.

It is believed that though nobody can take away God's moral purity they can try. So if you do good in order to respect and "give" moral purity to God that is an abuse. If it is selfish to avoid bad deeds for you want to be pure and you think your purity is the reason they are wrong then you can project this nonsense to God. You can do to him what you would be doing to yourself.

QUOTE: Moral absolutism is not unique among moral theories in requiring each person to do what will preserve his own moral purity in all circumstances. This is equally true of utilitarianism, or of any other theory which distinguishes between right and wrong. Any theory which defines the right course of action in various circumstances and asserts that one should adopt that course, ipso facto asserts that one should do what will preserve one's moral purity, simply because the right course of action is what will preserve one's moral purity in those circumstances. Of course utilitarianism does not assert that this is why one should adopt that course, but we have seen that the same is true of absolutism.

COMMENT: Utilitarianism is thought to be a pragmatic theory not a moral theory. It lies that it is about right and wrong. In principle, if you could turn your heart black and be totally evil that is good in the Utilitarian scheme as long as it somehow makes others happy whether you intend it to or not.

QUOTE: One may find then that one has no choice but to do something terrible. Nevertheless, even in such cases absolutism retains its force in that one cannot claim justification for the violation. It does not become all right.

COMMENT: If I have to kill x then it is the circumstances not me that is killing x. I am a victim too. I need compassion and I can say it was terrible but I had to do it. Nagel believes I must not be saying it became good or right because I had to do it - it is still bad. He says I cannot say it was in any way morally neutral either. Now what does the principle that ought implies can say? If I make that choice then I am not good or neutral so I must be bad and that is why I should not be praised or rewarded. Incredibly, though the terrible choice is not my fault I am not even offered any compensation for it. I need compensation more than a good person needs a reward. Religion rejects the view that God should give me the reward of a throne in Heaven for what I did which would be compensation for me but a reward for me if I had not made the terrible choice. So it has an immoral God. Its idea of God as justice and love and mercy does not agree with itself.

QUOTE: It is not in itself a contradiction to say that someone can do X or not do X, and that for him to take either course would be wrong. It merely contradicts the supposition that ought implies can - since presumably one ought to refrain from what is wrong, and in such a case it is impossible to do so.

COMMENT: Ought implies can is a major and core Christian doctrine. It is used to argue that nobody has an excuse for sinning. The religion then is saying that the wrong action at times is actually good when the alternative is just as bad.

QUOTE: To say that consequentialist reasons will be prominent is not to say what kinds of consequences matter. This is a well-worked field, and I shall avoid discussing the place of equality, liberty, autonomy and individual rights, as well as overall level of happiness, in a consequentialist view of the good. The point to remember is that consequentialist values need not be utilitarian; a consequentialist assessment of social institutions can be strongly egalitarian, in addition to valuing welfare, liberty, and individuality in themselves. Moreover, giving the members of a society the opportunity to lead their own lives free of consequentialist demands is one of the goods to be counted in a consequentialist social reckoning.

COMMENT: Interesting. It is not though going to be possible for consequentialists who put happiness above all to agree

with those who think liberty comes first. Conflict and aggression are inevitable. Suicide bombers in the name of religion are inspired by how life and principled people cannot avoid conflict direct and indirect.

QUOTE: One of the hardest lines to draw in public policy is the one that defines where the end stops justifying the means. If results were the only basis for public morality then it would be possible to justify anything, including torture and massacre, in the service of sufficiently large interests. Whether the limits are drawn by specific constitutional protections or not, the strongest constraints of individual morality will continue to limit what can be publicly justified.

COMMENT: Morality in a broad way and sticking to the minimum is necessary for the state to avoid caring only about results. Nobody will agree on the best way to manage that but there is a best way even if we do not know it or find it. The law is not there to enforce or represent Christian morality for it is about the end makes the methods right - a topic that is totally unChristian.

It shows that we should take the law as being about making guesses to form order not as a teacher of morality even public morality. In the case of abortion, it is immoral then it is up to moral people to guide people way from abortion and is not necessarily up to the law to ban it. A bad law should not be used and it is not to blame if the people use it.

QUOTE: A decision that people are equally or unequally deserving in some respect is not the end of the story. First of all, desert can be overridden, for example by liberty or even by efficiency. In some cases the presumption of equality is rather weak, and not much is required to depart from it. This will be so if the interest in question is minor or temporally circumscribed, and does not represent an important value in the subject's life. Second, it may be that although an inequality is contrary to desert, no one can benefit from its removal: all that can be done is to worsen the position of those who benefit undeservedly from its presence. Even if one believes that desert is a very important factor in determining just distributions, one need not object to inequalities that are to no one's disadvantage.

COMMENT: An answer to today's endless "equality" battlecries. Some are always left unequal to others no matter what.

QUOTE ON UTILITARIANISM: The moral equality of utilitarianism is a kind of majority rule: each person's interests count once, but some may be outweighed by others. It is not really a majority of persons that determines the result, but a majority of interests suitably weighted for intensity. Persons are equal in the sense that each of them is given a 'vote' weighted in proportion to the magnitude of his interests. Although this means that the interests of a minority can sometimes outweigh the interests of a majority, the basic idea is majoritarian because each individual is accorded the same (variable) weight and the outcome is determined by the largest total.

COMMENT: Majoritarianism is a form of authoritarianism so why utilitarianism is linked with liberalism and morality is a mystery. It is an ideological smokescreen. Not all utilitarians are going to be obvious. If you want others to sacrifice for the majority but don't want to do it yourself you will not admit your utilitarianism. There is no way of knowing if absolutist religions such as Christianity or Islam are really absolutist.

QUOTE: A right not to be killed, for example, is not a right that everyone do what is required to insure that you are not killed. It is merely a right not to be killed, and it is correlated with other people's duty not to kill you.

COMMENT: It is expected that people must do the minimum to protect you for it is too much work and too restricting and too invasive for them to have to do every single thing to keep you alive. Telling people they have a duty not to kill you is not protecting you. The whole issue is about how people may get to a point where they don't care about duties. If he means that those who say your life is sacred and should never be taken don't have to take safeguards to protect your life then their morality is inconsistent nonsense.

QUOTE REGARDING A VIEW: "not very different from the one I defended in The Possibility of Altruism, and I will only sketch it here. I believe that the general form of moral reasoning is to put yourself in other people's shoes. This leads to acceptance of an impersonal concern for them corresponding to the impersonal concern for yourself that is needed to avoid a radical incongruity between your attitudes from the personal and impersonal standpoints, i.e. from inside and outside your life. Some considerable disparity remains, because the personal concerns remain in relation to yourself and your life: they are not to be replaced or absorbed by the impersonal ones that correspond to them."

COMMENT: Putting yourself in the shoes of another is using projection so that you see them as somehow another you so you can help them. Whatever this is it is not altruism. It involves a lie to yourself for you cannot really believe that if nobody is helping x in her cancer battle that you should do it for you would want somebody to help you. You know the likelihood of you being in her shoes is nigh as good as impossible. Alike situations are not as alike as you think when you consider all the factors. Human nature is so selfish that it cannot help a person who is suffering intensely unless it imagines itself as being that person. You have to extend yourself and "be" that person to care!

QUOTE: The strongest cases of conflict are genuine dilemmas, where there is decisive support for two or more

incompatible courses of action or inaction. In that case a decision will still be necessary, but it will seem necessarily arbitrary. When two choices are very evenly balanced, it does not matter which choice one makes, and arbitrariness is no problem. But when each seems right for reasons that appear decisive and sufficient, arbitrariness means the lack of reasons...

COMMENT: If I have to make awful choice 1 and equally awful choice 2 the reasons for each do not matter for the choice. They only matter for the menu. Thus my act is arbitrary.

QUOTE REGARDING THE IDEA THAT EACH PERSON IS REALLY A NUMBER OF PERSONS SUMMED UP USUALLY ITS THE IDEA THAT LEFT BRAIN AND RIGHT BRAIN MEAN YOU ARE TWO PEOPLE: we have two minds which communicate by subtle peripheral cues; in the former we have a single mind. Nothing taken from either of those cases can compel us to assimilate the split-brain patient to one or the other of them. If we decided that they definitely had two minds, then it would be problematical why we did not conclude on anatomical grounds that everyone has two minds, but that we do not notice it except in these odd cases because most pairs-of minds in a single body run in perfect parallel due to the direct communication between the hemispheres.

COMMENT: It is a serious matter that such an idea cannot be disproven. For morality it means that to murder John is to murder two people. He goes on, in the light of the assumptions that each brain is one person to say that, "Split-brain patients fail dramatically to conform to these assumptions in experimental situations, and they fail over the simplest matters. Moreover the dissociation holds between two classes of conscious states each characterized by significant internal coherence: normal assumptions about the unity of consciousness hold intrahemispherically, although the requisite comparisons cannot be made across the interhemispheric gap. These considerations lead us back to the hypothesis that the patients have two minds each." So for Christians it means there are two Jesus!

FINALLY

The book shows the inconsistencies in morality and if God is morality then God cannot exist for a perfect God is that which is devoid of contradictions.