

WISDOM REGARDING DEATH AND DYING FROM A PHILOSOPHER

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.

Given what he thinks about life in the evil world it comes as no surprise to read what he says about death.

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 something related to conscious activity so if activity does not end at death then death is not death!

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.

Dying can hardly be that terrible when it is so hard to defend even the right to life!

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: 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.

