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Meaning, Value, Death, and God

By **John Shand**

In the world certain things and events have meaning and value for people as individuals. That is to say, they are respectively not just neutral objects and happenings, they have significance, they stand out for attention and to be noted while in addition they are thought to have more or less value. Both the meaning and value are derived from thought, emotion and associated actions. Overarchingly they are derived from our engagement in the world.

Some of these meanings and values are shared with others, but some are highly individual or shared only with a few who are close, such as family and friends. These meanings and values often arise not only from predilections and preferences, but also from the process of shared lives.

Think for example of a family home in which there occurs the death of the last to leave and the resulting collation of not just the objects in it but also the events that happened there. This is the auditorium of one's life, what gives it body and form. When one dies, if one is the last to go, one is just left with a detritus of objects and the ghost of events, actions and happenings, and then in turn those objects are removed or heading away from each other forever, the places where those events took place are overlaid and rubbed out by new ones, until not a trace remains that once had the meaning or value it did. Other events and places apart from homes can have similar meaning and value to the individual, and those meanings and values, that gave sense of what one's life is, are similarly extinguished upon death. Such meanings and values are both part of who we are and extensions of ourselves into the world.

When we die, if there is no-one to remember these personal meanings and values, they evaporate and vanish with our death. This is hard to face for most people. That all those objects, events and places that had the meaning and value they had for them just disappear as having those meanings and values. It is as if they never were, and consequently as they are tied to individual people, as if these people never were also. People need a way of dealing with this. To not be quite forgotten. They do not want it to be as though what had meaning and value in the end really had no meaning and value. It is hard enough when partings, removals and destructions take place when we are alive, but when we are dead, the annihilation is final and there is no possibility of setting up anew and imbuing a new beginning with meanings and values.

One way to face up to the reality of it is to bear it. When you die, the meanings things had for you, their value to you, die with you. Even if this might be the truth of the matter and the rational thing to believe, it's non-rationally understandable that people believe, or somewhat less firmly, hope-believe, that something else is the case, and that the meanings and values in their lives do not become utterly nothing.

One consolation that has some force are the memories of those who continue after one dies. Friends, family, but most potently perhaps one's children, offspring. It is commonplace to say that they may be viewed, even if in a literal sense it is only tentatively true, as a continuance of oneself. For those who face that truth one might they do so say bravely as it is the best they can expect. For them it is the best just because it is the truth.

But still it does not quite remove the anxiety of one's total erasure, one's drift into nothingness as though one had never been there. Not only might one not be remembered, let alone the minutiae of the meanings and values of things and happenings be remembered; those who do remember will themselves die and their memories with them peter out to nothing. Going from, as it were, a line inflected and nuanced by those meanings and values to one flatline extending off the rest of time.

For some this is not enough. Some desperately try to continue what things mean for them and how they are valued through works and objects that will last a long time. This is the Ozymandias strategy. Yet we know how that turned out. No matter how solid the objects, how grand the works, they will, given enough time, be forgotten and be the dust of nothingness, and be so for ever.

So what would make sure, if it were true, that our meanings and values never cease even after death, that we and they do not become nothing, all quite forgotten? That thorn of blinding anxiety that can overwhelm us and drive us into the darkest corner of helpless despair. It would have to be something that stands outside time and will never forget them. That entity can only be God.

There is no need to hold for the purpose of the argument here whether God exists or not. Personally I think he does not exist. What is the concern here is the reason for the compelling belief in God. For without him, our life will eventually, or even quite soon, have been nothing, as if it never occurred. A terrifying and crushing thought. This will drive hope-belief to put in place anything that will keep that thought at bay.

This, it may be argued, is the main explanation for, some might say, the *invention* of God. The explanation is non-rational, not a result of rational arguments for the existence of God. Which is also why arguments against the existence of God leave believers blithely untouched. As Hume thought: arguments only work against arguments.

It is sometimes said that there are other motivations for believing in God.

One is closely connected to death also, namely a wish that we never in fact really die, that at the end of this life we pass to another life and attain immortality for all eternity. But there is no necessary connection between immortality and the existence of God. We might attain immortality without there being a God, even if the existence of God makes the former more plausible. This is truly a motivation. But as the nature of such future existence is uncertain, and it is not firmly connected with what one was individually, indeed that is often supposed to be erased as unimportant, it does not have that connection to our particular lives with what had meaning and value to us.

Another reason given for belief in God is the lack of meaning in life without him. Without rehearsing all the arguments connected to that, we can at least say that again such meaning is too non-particular to our lives and its meanings and value, to who we were, to save those from destruction upon death. This is likely to be true even for those trying to make their lives entirely about what they think of as God's meaning for life, for even then the poignancy of the meanings and values of a particular life still sting for all but the extreme ascetic, self-denyingly cutting themselves off from worldly things.

Yet another reason to believe in the existence of God is that without him there would be no morality, no moral truth. But most people have a sense of right and wrong without referring to God. And it's difficult to know what he would think is right or wrong. In any case as Plato perhaps showed, morality exists independently of God for surely God (always) does the right thing rather than what is the right thing being what God does.

Finally, providing an explanation for the existence of the universe might be a motivation for believing in God's existence. But it's hardly likely to be a moving preoccupation that has any bearing on the meanings and values of one's own life, even if God is thought to be indispensable to any solution to how the universe came to exist.

One can contend that to preserve what has meaning and value to you, gives one's life its colour and individual substantial identity, is one of the most acutely powerful reasons for the belief-hope in God. For in God they will be remembered for all eternity and for sure, as God knows all. It may not be the only reason for believing in God, but it is certainly the motivation that carries the most intensity related to the individual, where other motivations are blunter and more theoretical.

For those who do not have such a belief, and indeed cannot, we just have to carry on, one might say, courageously carrying the background burden that not only we but all that we were, will cease to be forever after we die.
