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THE
CELEBRATION
OF
LIFE

A Dialogue on Hope, Spirit,
and the
Immortality of the Soul

NORMAN COUSINS



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He emphasized the need for hope and confidence; he was not depressed by the unknowable.

You make it sound as though man is minimized by existentialism.

The existentialist is detached from the larger body of which he is a part. He is preoccupied with the inevitability of personal death and recognizes no aspect of connection. He is therefore nonresponsible for the effects of his actions that may live after him.

The moment man becomes separated from his larger self, or the human totality, he tends to deny the moral content in the affairs of humans and of the universe itself. The concept of justice becomes inverted; i.e., he regards justice in largely subjective terms whereas justice, in order to become manifest, must have its own form and substance—which are absolute and eternal and which hold meaning. One of the principal gains in human development is represented by definitions of justice applied to specific situations. This is what is meant by codified law.

The individual is the ultimate cause, but that cause is defeated if individuals proclaim it for themselves. It is the difference between saying "I am as good as you are" and "You are as good as I am." The former statement leads to a breakdown of affirmative and social values. The latter statement prepares the ground for towers of purpose and achievement. Thus, some existential interpreters deny the identification and mutuality that make true justice possible.

But an even more basic weakness of existentialism is that it deals with life as random effect rather than as vital event. Indeed, the "meaninglessness of existence" is a phrase that often recurs in discussions of existentialism. For all practical purposes, life to the existentialist may actually be an illusion.

But long before existentialism, weren't important thinkers speculating on the possibility that life might be an illusion? Would you say that all those thinkers were negative or nihilist?

Certainly not. The notion of the universe as an illusion is a perfectly respectable philosophical idea and not necessarily negative. But when you put this idea in an existentialist setting, it takes on a somber coloration. It is precisely because life can be meaningful—even though you believe life may be an illusion—that we make this point.

What does your last sentence mean?

Significance can be attached to life independently of the argument over illusion versus reality. Philosophically speaking, the question of reality or illusion cannot be decided by objective proof, because the examining mechanism is the human mind, which is then trained on itself. Objective proof in this case would have to come from something outside the ken or scope of humankind. We may enlarge our objective techniques and even our knowledge, but we cannot change the basic fact that our position in contemplating the great questions is inherently subjective. But all these matters are besides the main point.

What is the main point?

Just that the question of universal illusion is irrelevant. The significance of life is not to be found in theories of illusion or reality, but in life itself. Humanity's lack of an objective position from which to contemplate ourselves need not cripple us philosophically or spiritually. Whatever the nature of the universe of

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which we are a part, we have minds and bodies that interact with other minds and bodies and with our full environment. That interaction has consequences, good and bad. And we most profitably can address ourselves to the fact of such consequences. What is truly meaningless is preoccupation with the "meaninglessness of existence." To repeat, we may not be able to prove objectively what we are or what we are part of, but such objective proof is of minor importance alongside the fact of interaction and consequence.

You mean to say that even though it could be demonstrated that life is actually an illusion, such a fact does not logically lead to the conclusion that existence is meaningless?

Precisely. For all we know, the universe, instead of being a vast something, might be a vast nothing, and we would still be justified in attaching meaning to life.

You speak of a "vast" nothingness. How can nothingness be "vast"? And how can life be meaningful if there is only "nothingness" in the universe?

It is quite possible to have a concept of nothingness in which something exists. For example, no vacuum is perfect. Shall we have a philosophical exercise by way of exploring the idea that there can be a "something" in "nothing" and that this "something" can be meaningful? Our first question has to do with the nature of the universe. What would you say the universe is?

Is there anything complicated about it? The universe is space, matter, and energy. Isn't that what the universe is?

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What about the source of its power? What is reality on the universal scale? Is "the universe" synonymous with "infinity," or is it a product of "infinity," or what? In short, what do we really know about the universe?

Well, we know what we see, don't we? We know that our world is part of something infinitely vast, for we see all around us the evidence of a Great Design.

I am glad you said that, for it helps me to sharpen my question. This evidence that you observe about you has led you to make certain conclusions or assumptions about the universe, such as the fact that it consists of space, matter, energy, et cetera.

Yes.

And are you sure that those conclusions are right?

No, but you haven't told me what is wrong about them.

I merely intended to raise some questions. Isn't it possible that our own deficiencies, or limitations, in our own faculties of observation or methods of observation affect our idea of the universe? People were convinced by their faculties for many centuries that the earth had to be flat. Our sense of observation told us that if two people walked in opposite directions, starting from a given point, they would get farther away from each other.

But then to the faculty of surface observations was added analytical comprehension—in short, the scientific method—and people eventually realized that the earth was round. What seemed an apparent absurdity—namely, that people could meet each other

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if they got farther and farther apart—turned out to be scientifically accurate. In short, people began to think in much broader terms than the old yardsticks made possible. Those old yardsticks were only good for limited purposes, such as laying the foundations for a house, or measuring a strip of land. As soon as people had to address themselves seriously to larger concepts—such as their contemplation of the world or the universe—they began to discover the need for different and better yardsticks.

We are talking, of course, about what is known as a changing frame of reference. This involves, doesn't it, the interchangeability of absolutes and relatives?

Is it possible for them to be interchangeable?

Your absolutes and relatives change as your frame of reference changes. Let's take the universe, for example. Can you, conceive of the universe existing if it was the size of an atom? I ask this question as part of the exercise I referred to a moment ago. This exercise is designed to show that life can be meaningful even if there is no objective proof of reality.

The entire universe the size of an atom? No, I cannot conceive of a universe that small, if you mean that it would still have inside it all the things that go to make up a universe as I understand it.

Very well, then. Let us proceed step by step. Suppose you were half your size, and everything about you was half its size—myself, this room, the city, the state, the nation, the world, and the universe itself. Would you be aware of the difference?

Well, if everything was reduced proportionately, I don't think I could tell the difference.

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We have now succeeded in reducing the universe to half its present size. The parts of that universe maintain fixed relativity—that is, they still bear the same relationship to each other inside an absolute whole.

Yes, but where is this leading us?

We've still got a long way to shrink before we get where we're going. Having reduced the universe in half, we now reduce it in half again . . . and again . . . and again. But each time we maintain the exact proportions. And since you have no sense of absolute size, for your measuring rods are also reduced proportionately, you have no way of knowing you are now one-sixteenth of your former size—or do you?

No, I don't see how I could know that, or prove it even if I did suspect it. Is that what you meant when you said that things are absolute only within a fixed frame of reference?

Yes. They are absolute in the sense that they maintain their same relative positions. Let us continue with our theoretical shrinkage. You are now one-sixteenth of your former size. I ask you to conceive of this process going on almost indefinitely. Can you conceive of yourself, for example, as being no larger than what you now recognize as a microscopic particle? Everything else, of course, would be in the same proportion.

Yes, but it is getting difficult.

It needn't be, since the proportions remain the same. Now keep shrinking your frame of reference until you are on an atomic scale.

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I'll try.

Now reduce yourself further still within the atom so that everything you can conceive of in the observable world and the world beyond that—indeed, your conception of the universe itself—everything is contained within a space no larger than an atomic particle.

And the proportions still remain the same inside the particle?

Yes.

Then, I guess I couldn't tell the difference.

Having done that, I ask you now to take the biggest, or rather, the smallest, hurdle of all. Do you know what a meson is?

I believe it is one of the smallest of the subatomic particles.

Precisely. It is one of the smallest particles known to scientists. For all intents and purposes, it is without size. But its effects can be felt. It is not nearly so small as the neutrino, which is theoretically the smallest thing we know of, but it is much more interesting because its energy has a finite lifetime.

I want to ask you to imagine that everything in the universe has been compressed into such a space. In this sense, through relativity, we try to put everything inside nothing.

You deflated my ego earlier when you spoke of immortality. Now there is nothing left of it at all.

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On the contrary, your ego wouldn't even know it had been shrunk so long as it was still large enough to assert itself in relation to other things.

But I still don't see what significance you attach to the fact that it is possible for everything to be inside something the size of a meson or what part this could have in my philosophy.

I will come to that. Right now I have done only half my job. You conceded that you could exist even though you may be smaller than what might be considered to be practically nothing. Having disposed of matter and space, we address ourselves to time. Let us go through the same process as before. Let us suppose that all the clocks in the world would move twice as fast, that the planets would revolve at twice their speed, that your senses were twice as fast, that everything grew or decayed at the same increase in speed. So long as this increase was constant in every respect, would you be able to tell the difference?

You mean I would live only half as long, but since everything is twice as fast, it would be as though I had lived my full life? Well, in that case, I don't suppose I would know the difference.

Very well, let us continue to speed up this time factor until finally your entire life takes place within what we now regard as a minute. So long as your capacity to live, think, and act is similarly speeded up, you would have no way of discerning any difference.

Now comes the final step. One of the shortest time sequences known to science is the half-life of the same meson we referred to earlier. This half-life of the meson is a microsecond cut into more than a million parts. Let us take one of these parts and theoretically

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subdivide it further so that it encompasses not only your entire life, not only all the ages of man, but the age of the universe itself. Galileo was fond of speculating upon the subdivisions of time until they became what he called "infinite instants." Do you agree that so long as the subdivisions remain constant in our meson, relativistically speaking, things would be as they are now, at least to your apparent senses?

Yes, I guess so.

What we have just done, of course, is to take everything inside our existing frame of reference and shift it to a theoretically smaller frame of reference by making such proportionate reductions as may be required to fit. You might argue, of course, that while a meson in the big frame of reference occupies a fixed size, it would be proportionately reduced and still remain a meson in the smaller frame of reference.

I like logic, but I am not sure I follow this. A moment ago I thought I could follow this line of reasoning. Now you have lost me completely.

What I just said was intended to meet the argument that as man is reduced in size, the meson is reduced with him. According to this argument, therefore, no matter how small a man gets, he cannot become as small as the meson, because the meson becomes proportionately smaller at the same time. It might also be argued that the functions of certain units in the universe are absolutely dependent upon an absolute size. But our exercise was predicated on the fact that the meson would be constant while our shrinking process was going on. The meson was theoretically the same while

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we kept cutting the universe in half and kept doubling the time factor until the universe became smaller than the fixed, or hypothetically absolute, size of the meson.

Now I see what you meant when you referred earlier to the interchangeability of absolutes and relatives.

Actually, I was trying to do something more important than to demonstrate that the absolute and the relative are not inconsistent and indeed are twin aspects of the universal order. The main purpose of our reduction sequence was to suggest that even if our universe is nothing more than an atomic speck, it is large enough to have vital significance through the interaction of one life with another and, in a larger sense, the interaction of all time, space, matter, and energy. We may never be able to prove in absolute terms that life is not an illusion, but it is within our capacity to comprehend that there is a consequential reality, and that this reality depends less on dimension than on interrelationship and effect.

May I ask, how do we know that the universe really isn't as small as you have hypothetically made it?

It may well be. In a sense, the universe may be conceived of as the smallest total unit of infinity.

You keep talking about the universe and infinity as though they were different things. Doesn't the universe embrace infinity?

It all depends on how we use the terms. I make a distinction in order to separate two related, though different, concepts. The universe, its system, order, energy, matter, space, time—all of

these are different aspects or manifestations of the same "thing." The "thing" itself may be absolute, but its aspects are relativistic. Infinity transcends both absolutes and relatives. How would you define infinity?

I once heard a definition of infinity that appealed to me. It was that infinity was larger than the largest thing I could think of.

Would it follow from your definition that the largest thing or unit you could think of could be regarded as the smallest thing or unit in infinity?

It might.

Paraphrasing this, might it not also be said that the universe has something of a frame of reference—while infinity does not? In the existing universal frame of reference, the frame itself may or may not be absolute, but at least the components are relative. Infinity is independent of size. It is neither large nor small, according to our limited notions of absolute and relative size. Attempts to view it in terms of dimension are as meaningless as the attempt to find the earth precipice to hell in the Middle Ages. Infinity eludes human imagination. It may not even be a function. It is that which lies beyond size and concept and, possibly, function. It is neither relative nor absolute. In fact, it is what the universe is not. It is a field for the relativistic unit that comprises the universal essence—that essence being the interaction and interchangeability of space, time, energy, matter. Now, what did you say your idea of infinity was, again?

I said it was larger than the largest thing I could think of.

Would you now be willing to modify that definition to say that it is a field, of which the universe as we conceive it may be only a speck?

I think so. In other words, I may actually be as small as your reduction sequence pictured me?

Perhaps even smaller, but size is not important. Function and essence are what count. Our tiny universe may be lost in infinity, but it operates and has an essence. And even within the universe itself, the separate parts or aspects may seem so minute as to be nonexistent within the whole, but each of these parts has its own significance. Each of these parts is none the less functional for being part of the universal void.

Did you say "void"?

Yes. I might more accurately have said "vacuum." How would you define a vacuum?

A vacuum is nothing; no, I mean a vacuum is something that contains nothing. But that doesn't sound right—something containing nothing...

On the contrary, it is an excellent description. We have vacuums in our laboratories—things that try to contain nothing. I say "try" because, for all our inventiveness, we have never succeeded in producing a perfect vacuum. We have never been able to create a perfect nothingness. In spite of our most ingenious efforts, something remains in the vacuum. There are always a few molecules left floating around. And yet we feel justified in calling

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it a vacuum because it serves the purposes of a vacuum. Now, can you imagine the same thing as being true of the universe?

You mean, can I imagine the universe as a vacuum?

Yes.

Frankly, I cannot. There are too many stars and planets and Milky Ways and galaxies for me to do that. All I have to do is to walk outside on a cool night and look up at the star-studded sky. My answer would be, literally, heavens no.

But you can accept the idea of a vacuum in which molecules exist?

Certainly.

All those stars and planets you are talking about are actually the molecules of universal space. And there are fewer of them, and they are relatively smaller in number, than the molecules in the finest vacuum produced in our laboratories.

You mean that the matter in space is actually so rare as to make the universe a vacuum?

Yes, for all intents and purposes. It is a vacuum so nearly perfect that, try as we might in our laboratories, we have never succeeded in approaching anything like it, with respect to the ratio of total matter to total space. And yet, what is important here is not the dominant nature of universal space, but the fact that molecules or stars and solar systems *do* exist.

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Can we go back a bit? I was just wondering why scientists have never been able to create a perfect vacuum. Are there any theories about this?

All we know is that the creation of a perfect vacuum may be more difficult than the splitting of an atom. We have been unable to eliminate all the molecules floating around after we have expelled matter from the vacuum. It may be that the answer to the ultimate universal force lies in the mystery of the imperfect vacuum—whether in our laboratories or in the universe. Perhaps it is the phenomenon of the vacuum that we ought to be scrutinizing for the approach to our ultimate answers rather than the mystery of infinity. The universal force may be manifest in the natural resistance to absolute nothingness. Putting it another way, we ought to be directing our energies and speculations to the significance of the simple fact that absolute nothingness is impossible.

I don't see anything so simple about that.

It is simple only in the sense that we don't have to send spaceships out into the Solar System to search for the nature of the universal force. The exploration and contemplation of a void might offer richer meaning for our quest of the nature of ultimate force.

You have made the statement that nothingness is impossible. Can you expand on that?

It is impossible either to conceive of absolute nothingness or to create absolute nothingness. Isn't it possible that the reason we say that something is created out of nothing is because our senses

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are conscious of the something but cannot conceive of the nothing? May it not be that there has never been an absolute nothingness? Whatever the force is that keeps nothingness from becoming absolute may be what we have in mind when we talk about creation.

Are you saying that whatever it is that keeps a somethingness from becoming a nothingness—in the vacuum or the universal void—is where ultimate force begins?

Let's modify that. Not where it begins, but where it exists. Since nothingness is not only the total absence of matter but also the total absence of time, this ultimate force must therefore be independent of time and matter; but the "something" that it creates can have both. Thus, the point at which the vacuum is about to become complete, but does not, may be the point at which universal reality manifests itself.

I am not sure I follow this. Do you mean that something happens in the universal vacuum whenever it seems to drop below certain critical limits with respect to universal matter or energy?

That's a good way of putting it. It doesn't make much difference whether we regard this as a process of resistance or conversion; there are critical limits below which the level of universal substance does not fall. In fact, our scientists say that new cosmic matter is being created all the time. We live in an expanding universe. As I suggested, the sum total of all our solar systems and galaxies may be as nothing in the total scheme, but they are everything in the more limited scheme in which they function. And they have essence.

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Function and essence are everything, then?

Function and essence count for a great deal, but they may not be everything. Indeed, so far as human beings are concerned, the uniqueness of humanity lies in a something that is beyond function and essence. Just as infinity may be defined as that which lies inside and also beyond universal space, so the uniqueness of man may be defined as the "something" that lies beyond function and essence.

I don't know what "something" means when you say there is a "something" that lies beyond function and essence. What "something"?

That is what has engrossed the theologians and philosophers ever since humanity began to think about itself. There has never been a more fascinating subject to command the human imagination. The "something" that lies beyond function and essence in man and that constitutes his uniqueness cannot adequately be described by any single term. Even "the individual's spirit" and "capacity for faith"—however poetic and evocative—are not the sum total of human uniqueness. "Perception" and "awareness" and "consciousness" represent other elements of his uniqueness without exhausting them. "Love," "compassion," and "sense of kinship" are characteristics within the capacity of man, but they, too, are part of a larger whole. Similarly, "intelligence," "imagination," "command of historical experience," and "ability to inspire and be inspired" are other parts of this whole but not the whole itself.

Just as it is necessary to think of infinity as lacking a specific form or even a specific substance, so humankind's uniqueness defies mere verbalization and exists in its combined manifestations. One might also say that this uniqueness is manifest in existence itself.