

*What Does It All Mean?*—Such is Nagel's title for his "very short introduction to philosophy." And how apt a title it is, even though he himself hardly seems to be aware of this in his Introduction (pp. 3-7), and I may well be taking it more in keeping with *my* understanding of philosophy than his.

According to this understanding, philosophy, although *constituted* by appropriate forms of the theoretical questions about meaning and truth, is *oriented* by the vital question properly distinguished as the existential question. But certainly not the least effective way of formulating the existential question is to ask, precisely, "What does it all mean?"—in the sense of what way of understanding myself and leading my life is appropriate to, or authorized by, the way things ultimately are? Thus, if one asks about "the center of philosophy," it doesn't lie, as Nagel is content to say, "in certain questions which the reflective human mind finds naturally puzzling" (p. 4)—although philosophy almost certainly does involve asking and answering just such questions; it lies rather in asking and answering this *one* question, which is the most vital of all our vital questions.

But, being in its own way a matter of critical reflection and proper theory, rather than self-understanding and life-praxis, philosophy as such asks and answers this vital question only indirectly, by directly asking and answering forms of the theoretical questions of meaning and truth appropriate to it as philosophy.

The connection between this line of reflection and my reflections elsewhere on Whitehead's understanding of philosophy's beginning and ending in wonder seems clear enough. For what, if not precisely wonder, could give rise to the orienting question of philosophy, "What does it all mean?"

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