Chapter 4
What is Life?
Why do people die?

After the miracle of having been born, why do I have to die?

Philosophically speaking...

Hold on a minute, Sensei!
When I die, everything will become nothing!

My existence will become nothing.

So will everything I have learned, and all of my happy memories.

My things, my family, everything will become nothing.

Why must I live a life in which death will turn everything into nothing?
If there were a heaven after death, where I could live an “eternal life” together with my friends and family,

how great would that be?

But in reality, no such place exists!
When I die everything will be over.

Why do I have to die?

Why have I been born into this kind of life?
If death is going to make everything become nothing,

I wish I had never been born at all!
Can I ask you something?

Sure

What do you mean by “I wish I’d never been born at all”?

モソモソ

Twinkle!

I mean that “I was not born” is better than “I have been born.”

When you weigh the value of each against the other, it looks like this.

Worse

Better

I have been born.

I was not born.
Can I ask you another question?

OK

Can you really compare the two?
In the case of “I was not born,” there is no “I” to determine how good or bad that situation is.

Since there is no being capable of weighing the value of “I was not born” when it comes to my own case, comparing the two is impossible from the start.

When this “I” itself is involved, it is impossible to compare existence and non-existence.
But even if this existing “I” cannot “compare” existence and non-existence,

I can still “desire” non-existence.

Wanting to *kill oneself* is an example of this.

So is wanting to *kill oneself* the same as wanting “to never have been born”?
In fact, these are two completely different desires.

They are different because committing suicide is an act you can carry out in the future.

As someone who has already been born,

“To never have been born” is something that is fundamentally impossible for me to carry out in the future.
Putting all of this together, saying “I wish I’d never been born” is not the same as saying that when I compare “I have been born” and “I was not born” “I was not born” is better.

Nor is it the same as saying that I want to kill myself.

So what does it mean?
To say “I wish I hadn’t been born” is to express a deep desire for the realization, in a here and now in which I do not exist, of a world whose history is such that “the event of my having been born did not occur in the past.”

But since such a world can never be realized, this can also be described as an attempt to demand the impossible.
This last page was quite difficult...

Philosophically speaking, there is no other way to say it.

Can’t you use a diagram or something to make it easier to understand?

By the way, Manmaru-kun.

Yes?

You find it hard to accept that everything will become nothing because of death, right?

Yes, that’s right.

* 無 means "Nothing."
Alright then, consider this.

Let us assume that being alive can be very painful.

If being alive has to be this painful, I want to die.

If being alive has to be this painful, I wish I had never been born.

What do you think when you read these two sentences?

I understand both very well.

Pain is always coming at us.
That's right, the desire to fundamentally eliminate the pain of being alive can be expressed both as “I want to die” and as “I wish I had never been born.”

Alright then, how about this?

If everything is going to become nothing because of death, I want to die.

If everything is going to become nothing because of death, I wish I had never been born.

What!?
If everything is going to become nothing because of death, I want to die.

I don’t understand this. If I will become nothing when I die, then I don’t want to die.

What I really wanted to say is more like this.

If everything is going to become nothing because of death, I wish I had never been born.

That’s exactly right!
The desire to fundamentally erase this situation in which “everything is going to become nothing because of death”

can only be expressed with the phrase “I wish I had never been born.”

In other words, what you wanted to express with the words “if everything is going to become nothing because of death, then I wish I had never been born”

is that if I had never been born the prospect of “everything becoming nothing because of death” would presumably never have arisen.

In other words
“Everything becoming nothing because of death” could only be completely prevented by “my not having been born.”

You wanted to say that you wished “my being threatened by death” would never occur, and that presumably this is only possible through “my not having been born.”
But you have already been born.

The problem of “everything becoming nothing because of death” is not solved by committing suicide now or in the future, nor is it solved by lamenting, “I wish I had never been born.”

If neither of these approaches can solve the problem, why not accept that “everything is going to become nothing because of death”...
... and try to find an answer by living your life positively and to the fullest?

Why not search for a way to sincerely affirm from the bottom of your heart "I’m truly glad that I have been born," even though everything is going to become nothing because of death?
You’re right! Sensei, somehow it’s like the light has broken through the clouds and begun to shine.

But sometimes I have thoughts like,

“If my life is going to be like this, I wish I had never been born,” or,

“I wish I had been born into a different life.”
I think about how much better another life would have been.
I understand your feelings.

But you only get to live once.

In reality you can only ever live your actual, one-time-only life.
To compare the life I have actually chosen to another life I could have lived and say “that life would have been better” or “that life would have been happier,” is to fall into the error of a comparison of things that fundamentally cannot be compared.
My one-time-only life that I am in the midst of living right now cannot be compared to anything else.

My life transcends the dimension of comparison.
Of course, it’s possible to imagine a different life.

It’s possible to imagine a life in which the problems arising in my current life have been solved.

For example, I can imagine a life in which I’m extraordinarily talented, have a wonderful partner who loves me, and am very rich.
But even if the problems I am facing in this actual world would not exist in that imaginary world,

I don’t truly wish that I had been born into that world.

This is precisely the kind of life in which I can think, “I’m truly glad that I have been born.”
I want you to live this life to the fullest without being tripped up by another life in your imagination!

But how can I do that?

You have to think about that on your own. You can’t have someone tell you.
Let’s think about it from a slightly different angle.

What exactly is a life to begin with?

OK

As I said in Chapter One, I cannot experience the instant my existence begins.

My phrasing was, “When I become aware of existing, I already exist.”

Let’s think about this using the word “birth.”
“Birth” is not “I was born at some point in the past.”

“Birth” is “When I become aware of it, I have already been born.”

Birth is always grasped in the “present perfect tense.”
That thing happened.
This thing happened.

When I become aware of it, I have already been born.

Awareness of birth

My life

Then, from the point of “when I become aware of it, I have been born,”

I look back at the sequence of events in which “this happened, that happened, and as a result I am here now in my current form” all at once.

When I do this, what I take in all at once while looking in the direction of the past is my “life”
And whenever this kind of awareness of birth comes to me

a new consciousness of “when I become aware of it, I have been born” arises,

and I turn toward the past and look back all at once over a new life.

The content of my life is never something fixed, but rather something that is constantly being renewed up to the end of my past each time I become aware of my birth.
Manga Introduction to Philosophy
An Exploration of Time, Existence, the Self, and the Meaning of Life

Masahiro Morioka

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The entire book PDF (76MB)

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