Living in the Shadow of Death

A Philosophical Study of the Evil of Annihilation

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

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1
Introduction

> To be mortal is the most basic human experience and yet man has never been able to accept it, grasp it, and behave accordingly. Man doesn't know how to be mortal.
>
> Goethe in Milan Kundera's *Immortality*[1]

Few of us doubt that death has a significant role to play in determining how we should live. Yet it is difficult to articulate exactly what that role should be. These kinds of thoughts sometimes lead to the nagging suspicion that there is, in some sense, a *right* way to be mortal—but that we are getting it *wrong*. This dissertation contributes to answering questions which arise in trying to map out how we should respond to the fact that we are going to die. These questions include: Can death be a misfortune for the one who dies? And supposing it can be, is there anything worthwhile one can do to safeguard against the evil of death? Would it be better to be immortal? What attitudes concerning one's death and mortality are rational?

One answer to the first of these questions has been defended several times over. Most philosophers writing on the subject have argued that death *can* be a misfortune for the one who dies. Furthermore, most of them agree about what makes death a misfortune: Death is an evil of privation; it is bad for the one who dies in virtue making her worse off than she would have been. The evil of death consists, in other words, in being precluded

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[1] Milan Kundera, *Immortality*, Kussi, Peter (tr.) (London: Faber, 1991) 240.

from having more of a good life.[2] Though I have some reservations about whether this presents the full story of the evil of death, this is a view with which I agree. There are, nevertheless, several philosophical problems which arise for this answer to the first of our questions. And there is only much more of this to be met in answering the rest of these questions.

This being a philosophical study of these questions, it is not surprising that disambiguating their reference to death should be the first task—"right off the bat", as the Americanism goes. The noun "death" and the verbs "die" and "dying" are multiply ambiguous. Consider, to begin with, that "death" is sometimes used to refer to the *process* of dying. Yet there are no philosophical problems associated with thinking the process of dying can be bad for the dying person. Undoubtedly, it can be agonizing and protracted. But the term "death" sometimes refers to *being dead* ("Even in death, her life was remembered"). Finally, it sometimes refers to a specific *event*, which one might say separates being alive and being dead ("At death, her life came to an end"). This third sense of the term is that which interests myself and most of the philosophers with whom I engage. Even so, talking about an event which separates being alive and being dead requires talking here and there about being dead. As it turns out,

[2] The view that death is an evil of privation seems to be ancient. According to Bernard Schumacher, there is textual evidence to attribute this view to Cicero, who was writing in the first century BCE, and to Plutarch, who was writing in the first century CE; see his *Death and Mortality in Contemporary Philosophy*, Miller, Michael J. (tr.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 159–66. Perhaps the most influential contemporary defence of this view is in Thomas Nagel, "Death", repr. in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979) 1–10. Versions of the same view are defended in Ben Bradley, *Well-being and Death* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Fred Feldman, *Confrontations with the Reaper: A Philosophical Study of the Nature and Value of Death* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); John Martin Fischer, *Our Stories: Essays on Life, Death and Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); and Steven Luper, *The Philosophy of Death* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), among many others.

there are philosophically interesting questions about "death" in that sense of the term too.

Taking a step back, it should be noticed that saying death is an evil of privation assumes that death marks the definitive end of a person's existence. Or, rather, since the term "person" is ambiguous too, it assumes that death marks the definitive end of a person's existence in the *relevant* sense. Given some interpretations of what it means to be a person, it might be true that people continue to exist for some time after their deaths as corpses.[3] However, in thinking about what a person's interests are with respect to her own death, these are certainly not relevant ways of understanding the term "person"; the existence of a corpse is certainly not to be envied.

Many people believe, and have believed, that we do continue to exist after death in the *relevant* sense. In fact, there are a number of philosophical arguments, many quite ancient, which purport to demonstrate that we are immortal. None of these arguments enjoy widespread support among contemporary philosophers, though.[4] More recently, studies in parapsychology and phenomena related to "near-death" experiences have been thought to constitute strong evidence for our survival beyond death. These have, regrettably, received relatively little attention from philosophers.[5] Nevertheless, in the face of such tempting areas of inquiry, I simply take for granted that what lies beyond death is oblivion. Indeed, even more cheekily, I assume that

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[3] This seems to rely on understanding persons as essentially biological organisms of some kind. Given this view, it might seem plausible that if the same organism continues to exist when it ceases to be *living* without being *destroyed*, then the same person continues to exist under those conditions. For a defence of the view that persons continue to exist as corpses after death, see Feldman, *Confrontations with the Reaper*, 89–105.

[4] For a brilliant critical study of philosophical and other arguments concerning immortality and the possibility of life after death, see R. K. W. Paterson, *Philosophy and the Belief in a Life after Death* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1995).

[5] A notable exception is John Martin Fischer & Benjamin Mitchell-Yellin, *Near-death Experiences: Understanding Visions of the Afterlife* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

reason requires us neither to believe in an afterlife nor to be agnostic about whether we survive death. In any philosophical study, one has to assume a stance on matters which in other philosophical studies are treated with unrelenting scepticism. Readers who find my own assumptions incredible are invited to regard the conclusions I defend as merely hypothetical. Even so, such readers will hopefully find this dissertation provides insight into some of what is at stake regarding whether there is life after death.

If death can be a misfortune for the one who dies, one might wonder whether there is something one can do *now* to diminish the misfortune one faces in death. Put differently, one might wonder whether it is possible to secure invulnerability to the evil of death. If this were possible, it would certainly be a profound consolation in the face of one's impending destruction. An obvious way to avoid any misfortune involved in death is simply to never die—and there are currently some organizations who are striving to extend our lifetimes indefinitely. But if the goal is to truly escape the inevitability of death, then there are insuperable challenges to be met; probably, our planet will not last forever and the universe will eventually become inhospitable to life. Alternatively, to avoid any misfortune involved in death, one might try to delay the end of one's life until one is so old one has nothing left to lose—if that should ever be the case. But the trouble with trying to put this into practise is that the timing of one's death depends on many factors which elude one's control. Is there not something worthwhile which one can do now to ensure that one's death, *whenever it comes*, will not be a misfortune?

The bad news is that there is not. Or so I argue in the second chapter. The reason for this is quite simple. If death is bad in virtue of making one worse off than one would have been, the only way to make death less bad is to ensure one would not be better off continuing to live. But that is not something worth doing. Confirming this answer, nevertheless, requires a detailed

consideration of far less simple matters. In particular, it requires assessing competing views about what makes death bad. It also requires assessing some views about what makes life good. The discussion of these in the second chapter is organized around an assessment of strategies for securing invulnerability which have their sources in artistic and philosophical literature from ancient and modern times.

Famously, the ancient philosopher Epicurus criticized the view that death can be a misfortune. This is the subject of the third chapter. In one of the most-quoted passages from ancient philosophy, Epicurus argues:

> So death, the most terrifying of all ills, is *nothing to us*, since so long as we exist, death is not with us; but when death comes, then we do not exist. It does not concern either the living or the dead, for the former it is not, and the latter are no more.[6]

Epicurus' pithy remarks leave a lot to the philosophical imagination. But he is usually interpreted as arguing that death cannot bad for the one who dies because there is no *time* at which death is bad for her; it cannot be bad for her before it happens, he assumes, but neither can it be bad for her after she ceases to exist. Death takes a person out of existence, and how can someone who no longer exists be the subject of a misfortune?

I agree with Epicurus that it is dubious to suppose death—or any event for that matter—can be bad before it happens. However, I disagree with Epicurus by arguing we should take seriously the possibility that death is bad at times after it has happened. We should also take seriously the possibility that death is bad timelessly. Neither of these views are as problematic as Epicurus takes them to be. Or, at least, neither are as

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[6] Epicurus, "Letter to Menoeceus", *The Stoic and Epicurean Philosophers: The Complete Extant Writings of Epicurus, Epictetus, Lucretius and Marcus Aurelius,* Bailey, Cyril (tr.), Oates, Whitney J (ed.) (New York, NY: Random House, 1940) 31. Emphasis added.

problematic as the denial that death is an evil of privation. I argue that if one denies that one is ever worse off or better off dying at some time rather than continuing to live, one must accept that there is never any prudential, or self-interested, reason either to prolong one's life or to bring it to an earlier end. As I aim to show, those who find the Epicurean view appealing should not be tempted to bite the bullet on this issue.

The friend of the Epicurean stance might, of course, refuse to describe what is "bad" in the sense of being worse as *bad* and refuse to describe what is "good" in the sense of being better as *good*. Or she might deny that these terms are appropriate when talking about an event that takes a person out of existence. She could insist that saying death is "bad", an "evil", a "misfortune" or a "harm" is misleading if one merely means that dying at some time makes one worse off than one would have been continuing to live. But such semantic squabbles are merely complaints about one's style of expression. These contribute nothing substantive to answering the questions which I explore in this dissertation. It would involve some inconvenience to cast my views always in terms of what is *better*, what is *worse*, and what one *has reason* to do, forgoing terms like *bad*, *evil*, *misfortune* and *harm*, yet the substance of those views would remain the same.

There is another argument often given against Epicurus' views. Many argue that if it is not bad to die, then it is difficult to explain plausibly why killing should be wrong, especially if it is done quickly and painlessly. I am sympathetic to this argument. However, I do not explore it further here. It is difficult to incorporate a thorough assessment of it without biting off more than one can chew. Perhaps killing is wrong because it involves treating a person as a mere means rather than an end in themselves and acting according to a maxim which could not be willed as a universal law. Perhaps it is wrong because it demonstrates vicious character traits. Though the observation that killing is

wrong, at least in typical cases, is undisputed, the question of what makes killing wrong is surprisingly complex.

Epicurus's ultimate aims in giving his argument are *therapeutic*. His concern is to combat the fear of death, which he sees as a source of great suffering in life. By showing that death is nothing to us—that there is nothing to be frightened of in death—he seeks to rid us of this barrier to happiness.[7] Epicurus' final conclusion, then, is that fearing one's own death, or more generally regarding it with any disapproving attitude, is irrational.[8] Answering Epicurus, therefore, requires more than showing that death can be bad for the one who dies in a sense that makes it worth putting off. It also requires assessing whether disapproving attitudes concerning death can meet the requirements of rationality. The rationality of our attitudes regarding death is the subject of the fourth chapter.

There are, however, a variety of ways in which one's attitudes concerning death could fail to meet the requirements of rationality. In fact, I attempt to highlight just how complicated and potentially unsystematic we should expect a full account of which attitudes are *all-things-considered* rational to be. Contrary to the Epicurean view, this is not a matter where one size fits all, so to speak; the rationality of our attitudes concerning death is not invariant to circumstances. But the construction of such a

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[7] One study of the ancient Epicureans which emphasizes the therapeutic focus of their arguments is Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practise in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

[8] My interests here are not primarily in the history of philosophy. As such, I do not engage with the nuances of Epicurus' extant texts. I might, therefore, sometimes be in conversation with contemporary philosophers' misinterpretations of Epicurus. Kai Draper, for instance, argues there is textual evidence for attributing to Epicurus the view that death is an evil of privation but that evils of privation are not fitting objects of negative attitudes ("Epicurus on the Value of Death", *The Metaphysics and Ethics of Death*, Taylor, James Stacey (ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 71–9). However, I have no qualms about this, as long as I have not neglected arguments which are worth considering. To that end, I have benefitted from the thorough textual analysis in James Warren, *Facing Death: Epicurus and his Critics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

full account of rational attitudes is not one of my goals in the fourth chapter. Unlike Epicurus, therefore, I have few final recommendations about how we should anticipate death. Instead, I respond to some problems for thinking that disapproving attitudes concerning death *could ever* be rational. These arise from considerations about the *fittingness* or *appropriateness* of different kinds of attitudes concerning death.

One of these problems has to do with an often-overlooked feature of the view that death is an evil of privation. According to this view, I said, death is bad for the one who dies in virtue of making her worse off than she would have been. Claims about whether death is bad thus depend on certain counterfactual claims—about what would have happened if some event had not occurred. The problem is that counterfactuals are notoriously vague. Yet unravelling this problem helps to clarify exactly what must be true of the evil of death for some common attitudes towards death to be appropriate. If it is appropriate not merely to have preferences regarding when and how one should die but to be *terrified* by death, I argue, this gives credence to the view that one's annihilation at death is itself something to be regarded as an evil.[9]

Another problem concerns cases where it seems irrational to be distressed about events or states of affairs which preclude one from having more of a good life (or more goods in one's life). The most famous of these is described by Epicurus' follower Lucretius. He writes:

> Look back now and consider how the bygone ages of eternity that elapsed before our birth were nothing to us. Here, then, is a mirror in which nature shows us the time to come after our death. Do you see anything fearful in it?[10]

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[9] The view that annihilation itself is an evil is apparently also ancient. James Warren identifies it is Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations*; see Warren's *Facing Death*, 44.
[10] Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, Smith, Martin (tr.) (Indiana, IN: Hackett Publishing, 2001) 96 [3.972–7].

Lucretius' mirror-image metaphor has been thought to pose the following challenge: If the time at which one came into existence limits the duration of one's life in the same manner as the time at one goes out of existence, then why should it be rational to regret not dying later when it appears irrational to regret not coming into existence earlier?[11] Answering Lucretius' challenge, and similar challenges posed by other examples, forces us to take further notice of the variety of ways in which one's attitudes could fail to meet the requirements of rationality. However, I argue that these do not force us to abandon the view that it is appropriate to regard one's death unfavourably.

Even if the specific *event* of an individual's death can be, or often is, a misfortune for her, it remains an open question whether it is better to be immortal than to be mortal. In other words, it remains an open question whether it is better not to be a being for whom death is inevitable. Indeed, surprisingly many philosophers argue that we would not be better off without death, even though it is usually bad for us to die when we do. In opposition to this, Peter Loptson argues "these two independent lines of thinking about death combine to produce a kind of *antinomy*: they box the attempt to understand the significance of death into a corner from which no adequate emergence seems

[11] There is, admittedly, only a tendentious link between Lucretius' poem and this problem. Lucretius seems to be interested in our attitudes towards our *non-existence* after death and before conception. According to an interpretation James Warren offers, Lucretius' argument proceeds from the premise that our pre-natal non-existence *was not* a misfortune for us *before* we came into existence to the conclusion that our post-mortem non-existence *will not* be a misfortune for us *after* we cease to exist (*Facing Death*, 57–68). Roy Sorensen attributes the challenge which myself and most others address to a misinterpretation of Lucretius by Thomas Nagel, based on a faulty translation of the key lines of Lucretius' poem ("The Symmetry Problem", *The Oxford Handbook of the Philosophy of Death*, Bradley, Ben, Feldman, Fred & Jens Johansson (eds.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 245–6).

possible".[12] If Loptson means to say it is contradictory to suppose immortality is undesirable if death is often bad, however, then his remarks rely on a simple mistake. He seems to take this combination of views to assert that death is both bad for us, since we are typically better off dying later, and good for us, since we would be worse off living forever. Yet, as Geoffrey Scarre puts the point, this involves failing to distinguish "the regrettable brevity of our lives" from "the inevitability of death": "We can quite consistently hold both that the grim reaper gathers us too early and that a life that went on interminably would be bad for us."[13] Christine Overall is closer to the mark in describing this combination of views as positing an "axiological double bind"[14], but even this is not quite correct; if there is a specific time from which the problems that beset an eternal existence begin, this "double bind" could be escaped by dying at the right time.

Several philosophers have argued an immortal life *could not* be worth choosing *for creatures like ourselves*. Typically, the aim of their arguments is to reconcile us with our mortality by offering us reason to be glad of it. Many of these philosophers follow Bernard Williams' lead in arguing that we face a dilemma with respect to the desirability of immortality. Famously, Williams defended the view that an immortal life would either fail to be attractive or fail to involve a preservation of one's personal identity.[15] In other words, on his view, immortality would either not be worth choosing or would not be a genuine kind of immortality at all, since the person one is would eventually cease to be. In the

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[12] Peter Loptson, "The Antinomy of Death", *Death and Philosophy*, Malpas, Jeff & Robert Solomon (eds.) (New York, NY: Routledge, 1998) 135. Emphasis added.
[13] Geoffrey Scarre, *Death* (Stocksfield: Acumen, 2005) 61.
[14] Christine Overall, *Aging, Death, and Human Longevity: A Philosophical Inquiry* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2003) 126.
[15] Bernard Williams, "The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality", repr. in *Life, Death & Meaning: Key Philosophical Readings on the Big Questions*, Benatar, David (ed.) (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004) 331–47.

fifth chapter, I argue that this is a false dilemma. In its place, I defend the more modest view that immortality can be, and sometimes is, preferable to mortality. Moreover, I argue that choiceworthy ways of being immortal do not clearly threaten the continuity of our identity.

One of the considerations which emerges in dealing with the puzzles of the fourth chapter is a simple bit of advice which few need to be convinced to follow. In general, it tends to be *imprudent* to be troubled very intensely and very often by matters which there is no realistic possibility of changing. Some people seem to think this is enough reason to think fearing death is irrational. The Stoic philosopher Epictetus, for instance, asks: "What difference, then, is it to me how I pass away, whether by drowning or by a fever? For by something of the sort I must needs pass away."[16] Epictetus' remarks blur the distinction between the specific *event* of one's death and the *fact* that death is inevitable. Noticing this helps to clarify where he overstates his case. Though we are probably powerless to affect the inevitability of death, we are not completely powerless to affect *how* and *when* we die, even if we have limited control over this. What's more, recognizing that it *tends* to be imprudent to obsess about matters over which we have no control is consistent with having moments of terror in contemplating one's eventual destruction.

In the end, all this leaves a lot unexplored. For example, if it is appropriate to be anxious about death, but imprudent to be consumed by anxiety, it is worth asking how one's dread of death should be tempered. Instead of living in denial or neglect of death, the early modern essayist Michel de Montaigne recommends we overcome death's power to terrify us through

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[16] Epictetus, *The Discourses as Reported by Arrian, the Manuel, and Fragments, Volume 1*, Oldfather, W. A. (tr.) (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926) 241 [Bk. II, ch. v, 10–7].

continual meditation on it.[17] Consideration of this practical question, unfortunately, could not fit into this dissertation. It should also be noticed that the kinds of questions which are dealt with here are concerned with which ways of responding to one's own death one has *self-interested* rather than *other-regarding* reason to adopt. To some extent, this leaves out an examination of a moral perspective on these issues. For the most part, this is because how death affects the one who dies is more puzzling than how it affects others. No one doubts that suffering the loss of another person is one of the most profound misfortunes to be faced, and no subtle philosophical discourse is needed to establish this truth. Even Epicurus' views on death are entirely consistent with fearing that one's death will devastate those one leaves behind. But how other-regarding considerations influence these matters does not go totally unnoticed here. In the fourth and fifth chapters, I consider how our self-interested reasons for reacting to death in certain ways could conflict with our other-regarding reasons for reacting in other ways.

Unlike the works of Epicureans, this is not a *therapeutic* work of philosophy. There are no profound consolations which are going to be revealed between these and the last pages. If anything, this dissertation is a work for the disconsolate. In many ways, it affirms that the "answer" to the "problem" of death is that there is no answer. By Epicurus' standards, then, the contents of the chapters which follow fail to meet the desiderata of a successful philosophical argument:

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[17] Montaigne writes: "[L]et us rid [death] of its strangeness, come to know it, get used to it. Let us have nothing on our minds as often as death. […] Amid feasting and gaiety let us ever keep in mind this refrain, the memory of our condition; and let us never allow ourselves to be so carried away by pleasure that we do not sometimes remember in how many ways this happiness of ours is prey to death, and how death's clutches threaten it" ("That to Philosophize is to Learn How to Die", *Great Books of the Western World, Volume 23*, Frame, Donald (tr.), Adler, Mortimer (ed.) (Chicago, IL: Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 1992) 86).

> Empty is that philosopher's argument by which no human disease is healed; for just as there is no benefit in medicine if it does drive out bodily diseases, so there is no benefit in philosophy if it does not drive out the disease of the soul.[18]

In anticipation of such worries, it is tempting to begin a work like this by citing the usual clichés—about our species' paradoxical situation of being at once death-denying and uniquely aware of our mortality—as though these observations by themselves are meant to justify enquiry concerning death. However, I am content simply to accept that this is an enquiry for enquiry's sake, recognizing that relatively few works of philosophy have more to be said in their favour. "Like true leisure and love," Bernard Schumacher writes, "philosophy cannot be evaluated in terms of profitability."[19]

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[18] Epicurus, *The Epicurus Reader: Selected Writings and Testimonia*, Inwood, Brad & L. P. Gerson (tr.) (Indiana, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1994) 99.
[19] *Death and Mortality in Contemporary Philosophy*, ix.

2
Death Undefeated

> The mind blanks at the glare. Not in remorse
> —The good not done, the love not given, time
> Torn off unused—nor wretchedly because
> An only life can take so long to climb
> Clear of its wrong beginnings, and may never;
> But at the total emptiness for ever,
> The sure extinction that we travel to
> And shall be lost in always. Not to be here,
> Not to be anywhere,
> And soon; nothing more terrible, nothing more true.
>
> Philip Larkin[1]

2.1 The challenge from the deprivation account

Is there anything worthwhile one can do to secure invulnerability to the evil of death—to ensure, in other words, that one's death, whenever it comes, will not be bad for one? Given the deprivation account of death's badness, I argue, the prospects of doing so are bleak. The deprivation account has come to be the most widely accepted view regarding the evil of death. In short, it states that death is bad for the one who dies insofar as continuing to live would have been good. The central insight of this view turns on a distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic goods and evils. Something is good or bad *intrinsically* if and only if its

[1] Philip Larkin, "Aubade", repr. in *Collected Poems*, Thwaite, Anthony (ed.) (London: Faber and Faber, 2003) 190.

goodness or badness is not derived from the goodness or badness of anything beyond itself. Otherwise, it is *extrinsically* good or bad. Something might be extrinsically bad, for example, either in virtue of promoting further intrinsic evils or in virtue of precluding further intrinsic goods. The deprivation account states that death is bad for the one who dies not intrinsically but extrinsically. More specifically, that death is bad in virtue of precluding the attainment of further intrinsic goods.

Advocates of this view typically appeal to a more general principle concerning the *overall* value of events—a value which combines both its intrinsic and extrinsic value. According to this view: The overall value of an event for a person is the total difference it makes to how well she fares in life; it is determined by comparing the intrinsic value of her whole life on balance in the world the event occurs to that in the closest, or most similar, possible world in which the event does not occur.[2] If the value of her life is greater in closest possible world in which the event does not occur, the event is bad for her overall. If the value of her life is smaller in the closest possible world in which the event does not occur, the event is good for her overall. This view of overall value is called *comparativism*.[3]

The deprivation account of death's badness applies comparativism to the event of death. According to this view, therefore, a person's death is overall bad for her when her life as a whole would have been better had she not died. This would be so whenever continued existence would have introduced more goods than evils. As such, the sense in which death is bad for the person who dies on the deprivation account is essentially

[2] Like others in the literature, I refer to "possible worlds" as a short-hand for referring to consistent statements about the way things might have been, without wishing to appeal to *modal realism*; the view that all possible worlds exist. Similarly, I use the metaphor of closeness to refer to the similarity of different possible worlds.

[3] The label seems originally to have been Steven Luper's but is now the standard label for this view.

comparative; death is bad for the one who dies in the sense of being *worse* than continuing to live.

The deprivation account and comparativism have received such extensive treatment in the literature that there is much to be said about their details. In the fourth chapter, I attend in greater detail to counterfactual element in the deprivation account. There I highlight some implications for how we should understand the deprivation account given the vagueness regarding what counts as the closest possible world in which some event does not occur.[4] However, for the purpose of this chapter, it will suffice to take note of just two features of the deprivation account.

First, the deprivation account does not assume what has intrinsic value for us. It merely asserts that a person's death is bad for her insofar as it prevents her life as a whole from containing more of whatever possesses such value. Therefore, it has the advantage of being compatible with various competing theories of well-being. An influential taxonomy distinguishes three kinds of theories of well-being[5]: According to *hedonistic* theories, what makes life go well are experiences of pleasure and what makes life go badly are experiences of pain. According to *desire satisfaction* theories, what makes life go well is the satisfaction of one's desires and what makes life go badly is their frustration. Finally, according to *objective list* theories, what makes life go well is the presence of a number of distinct goods and what makes life go badly is the presence of a number of distinct evils, some of which might be good or bad independently of one's experiencing them. The goods of achievement, friendship, and knowledge, and the evils of failure, of betrayal, and of being deceived, are among the goods and evils sometimes included on

[4] See section *4.2.*

[5] Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984) 493–502. Parfit's distinction is quite standard, but it does obscure some other ways of distinguishing different views about well-being.

objective list theories. The deprivation account is compatible with all of these views.

Second, the deprivation account allows that a person's death can be overall good for her or neither good nor bad overall. Given comparativism, a person's death would be overall good for her when the value of her life as a whole is less in the closest possible world in which she does not die than in the actual world. This would be so whenever continued existence would bring more evils than goods. Her death would be neither good nor bad for her when the value of her life as a whole is equal between the world in which she dies and the closest possible world in which she lives. This might be because continued existence does not provide further goods and evils at all, but it could also be because the goods it brings are matched by the evils it brings. This is typically regarded as another advantage of the deprivation account; it seems correct that death would not be bad if one's continued existence would be so wretched that no further benefits could be derived from life, or none which are not bought at equal cost.

It might seem then, at first glance, that the deprivation account is well-suited to provide an explanation for how some strategy of securing invulnerability to the evil of death might work. After all, it allows that death's badness is contingent rather than necessary. But, on the contrary, the deprivation account generates a powerful challenge to the project of disarming death of its badness. Steven Luper puts this challenge forward well:

> If comparativism is correct, then being harmed may involve our enduring intrinsic evils. However, it might instead involve our being *precluded from gaining* intrinsic goods we otherwise would have had. So, we cannot make ourselves invulnerable to harm merely by avoiding intrinsic evils. We must also protect ourselves from things that would take away intrinsic goods we otherwise would have. Hence the only way to ensure that death will not harm us is to so situate ourselves that the life it takes from us would *not be good for*

> *us*. To do that, we must see to it that our remaining life is bad for us, or at least that it is neither good nor bad for us. Yet doing this to ourselves is self-defeating: […] It amounts to depriving ourselves of any further good life in order to rule out the possibility that death will deprive us of good life.[6]

The thrust of this argument is that to "triumph" against the evil of death is not in our interests. This picture of the project of securing invulnerability to a bad death casts it as comparable to the attempt to prevent theft of one's prized possessions by destroying them. The argument might be formulated as follows: (1) Death is bad for the one who dies just insofar as it precludes a future which she is better off having. (2) If this is what makes one's death bad, then the only way to diminish its badness is to ensure one is not better off having the future it precludes. (3) It is not in one's interests to ensure one is not better off having the future one's death precludes. Therefore, (4) it is not in one's interests to diminish the badness of one's death.

Premises 1 and 2 are hopefully made clear by the presentation of the deprivation account I have already given. But premise 3 might be understood more clearly if one tries to conceive of how strategies for diminishing the badness of one's death might be put into practice. One important consideration in our practical dealings with death is captured by the Latin phrase *mors*

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[6] Steven Luper, "Adaption", *The Metaphysics and Ethics of Death*, Taylor, James Stacey (ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 106. Geoffrey Scarre advances this general criticism of strategies of resistance to death's badness too, remarking: "Of course, we could reduce the extent of the losses we suffer through death if we moderated our desires, pared down our projects, curtailed our relationships and generally did our best to avoid becoming emotionally committed to anyone or anything. […] One can evidently only lose a life worth living if one has a worthwhile life in the first place. Cutting oneself off from the things that make life valuable is not a reasonable way of blunting the sharpness of death" (*Death*, 104.) Ben Bradley agrees, arguing that the strategies for disarming death allowed by the deprivation account "involve an attempt to make death less bad by ensuring there is no valuable future for it to take" and that "not having a valuable future seems like an undesirable situation to be in" (*Well-being and Death*, 156).

certa, hora incerta (“death is certain, its hour uncertain”). One rarely knows when the end of one’s life will come with much certainty. Most often, it is possible, for all one knows, for one’s death to occur at any moment in the future. Typically, then, one ought to prepare for one’s death as early as possible, as it is more probable death will interfere those preparations the longer one procrastinates. Yet if the challenge from the deprivation account holds, then preparations aimed to prevent one from facing a death that is a misfortune would be *worse* for those practising them the earlier these are undertaken.

Imagine Ms. Black is dying and ensures, mere moments before her death, that continuing to live would not promise anything good for her. Under these circumstances, Ms. Black merely overdetermines the same privation of future goods which would have been caused by her death. Here, she does not promote her interests—that is, she does not contribute positively to her well-being. But, at the same time, Ms. Black does not act significantly against her interests, since what further goods she would have had if she had not acted so are negligible. Now imagine Ms. White, who guarantees years before her death that the life remaining to her is devoid of anything good of which its ending might deprive her. Ms. White will have acted significantly against her interests if those were years which otherwise would have contained enough goods to outweigh any evils to be met there.

The claim that it is not in one’s interests to ensure there is no privation of goods to be faced in death should be understood in a dual manner. In some cases, acting in this way will not be in one’s interests in the sense that it would not promote her interests. But in other cases, it will not be in one’s interests in the sense that it would involve acting against one’s interests. Indeed, in those cases, it would seem to be *self-defeating*; it would involve incurring a harm analogous to that which one is trying to escape from incurring in death.

If the project of securing invulnerability to the evil of death is to be defended, one of the premises of the argument above must be rejected. Friends of resistance to the evil of death might try to reject premise 1 by arguing death is not—or not merely—an evil of privation, and that its bad-making properties can be eliminated in a worthwhile manner. Alternatively, they might try to reject premise 2 by arguing that even if death is an evil of privation, the badness of death can be diminished without ensuring that the future precluded by death would not be beneficial. Finally, they might try to reject premise 3 by arguing it is possible to make sure the future precluded by death would not be beneficial while still acting in one's interests.

2.2 The inescapable evil of annihilation

The deprivation account of death's badness, as ordinarily construed, implies it is possible for death to be not only *overall* neutral for the one who dies—if continued existence would involve the same amount of goods and evils—but bad for her *to no extent at all*—if continued existence would be utterly lacking in further goods. In opposition to this, a minority of philosophers have argued that even when it is overall better not to continue living, death is still the lesser of two evils; death is always *pro tanto* bad for the one who dies.

Most recently, this view has been defended by David Benatar. He argues that the deprivation account ought to be supplemented with the view that *annihilation* itself is bad for the one who is annihilated:

> Death is bad not merely because of the future goods that one would otherwise have had, but also because it *obliterates* one. Put another way, we have an interest not only in the future goods we would have if we continued living, but also in continued existence itself. Death can deprive us of the goods and also thwart the interest in continued existence. […] Annihilation of a being may not be the *worst* of fates

> for that being, but it certainly seems to involve a significant loss—namely, the loss of the self.[7]

This view, it should be noted, might be interpreted in two ways.[8] According to one interpretation, which is closest to Benatar's presentation of the view, the evil involved in annihilation itself is distinct from the evil of privation I have explored so far. This version of the view is defended by Frances Kamm, who identifies the permanent ending of all significant periods of life as an evil additional to that of the prevention of further goods—which she calls the "Extinction Factor".[9] However, I refer to this view *the annihilation account*. On this view, a person's annihilation is intrinsically, or non-comparatively, bad for her; by annihilating the one who dies, death thwarts an interest one has in continued existence that is distinct from one's interest in receiving future goods.

On the other hand, Benatar's proposal might be construed such that continued existence as a person is regarded as having positive intrinsic value—that is, independently of what is made possible by continued existence, such as pleasure or the satisfaction of desire. Thomas Nagel defends this view. Though he claims that "if death is an evil at all, it cannot be because of its positive features, but only because of what it deprives us of", he argues some of the goods in living "are so general as to be constitutive of human life".[10] In his view, what remains when one subtracts from conscious experience the goods and evils that form its contents "is not merely *neutral*: it is emphatically positive", such that "it is good simply to be alive, even if one is

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[7] David Benatar, *The Human Predicament: A Candid Guide to Life's Biggest Questions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017) 102–4.
[8] See *ibid.*, 110.
[9] F. M. Kamm, *Morality, Mortality, Volume 1: Death and Whom to Save from It* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) *passim*.
[10] "Death", 1–2.

undergoing terrible experiences".[11] Shelley Kagan refers to this view *the valuable container theory*[12], since it posits that life itself, and not merely its contents, is valuable. On this view, the permanent cessation of a person's existence is necessarily bad, but is so only by comparison with continued existence; by annihilating the one who dies, death thwarts an interest in continued existence which is *not* distinct from one's interest in receiving future goods.

Nevertheless, appealing either of these interpretations as a supplement to the original version of the deprivation account would create a further difficulty for those who wish to secure a harmless death. According to either view, strategies for disarming death of its badness would be confronted by at least one inescapable evil in death—that of annihilation. Of course, as Benatar notices, death might, arguably, not involve annihilation; if persons—in the prudentially relevant sense—are to be understood as essentially psychological beings, then the annihilation of a person might come before her death in the biological sense.[13] Think, for example, of how, when someone is in a permanent vegetative state or suffers from severe dementia, those who love her might say that the person they loved is gone, even though her body remains. But there would clearly be no point in trying to separate one's annihilation from one's biological death. By doing so, one would merely relocate in time the misfortune one

[11] "Death", 2. Nagel's positive evaluation of existence as a person is echoed in Todd May, *Death* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2009) *passim*, and in Bernard Schumacher, *Death and Mortality in Contemporary Philosophy*, 204–6. Schumacher takes things a little too far in suggesting that life itself is so good as to make it always *all-things-considered* bad to die. Steven Luper is right to argue that such a position represents an unwarranted, "Panglossian" view about the goodness of living; see his "Review of Bernard Schumacher's Death and Mortality in Contemporary Philosophy", *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews,* <http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/death-and-mortality-in-contemporary-philosophy/>.
[12] Shelly Kagan, *Death* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012) 259.
[13] *The Human Predicament*, 105.

faces in annihilation. The only way to escape such a misfortune altogether would be by continuing to exist for eternity.

But what reason is there to believe annihilation itself is bad for the one who dies? In defence of this view, Kamm offers a thought experiment that centres on someone who is given a choice between two alternative futures.[14] One of the options is to enter the limbo of a comatose state for a prolonged period of time and then re-awaken to enjoy the remainder of one's life. The other is to continue living without this interruption. We are asked to assume that each of these futures contain the same amount of value for this person The person who faces this choice, "Limbo Man", chooses to enter the comatose state—despite the fact that both options introduce the same quantity of further goods into his life as a whole—in order to delay the ending of his existence. Limbo Man's preference is best explained, Kamm argues, by supposing that he is "concerned with his not being all over, in a way that is independent of wanting *more* goods of life".[15] Consequently, insofar as one agrees with Limbo Man's preference, Kamm argues, it is likely that one is similarly motivated by acceptance of the view that annihilation itself—and not merely the deprivation of goods it causes—is a bad to be avoided.

Even so, while agreement with Limbo Man's preference might reveal assent to the annihilation account or the valuable container theory, disagreement with Limbo Man's preference need not be motivated by a rejection of these views. This is because other factors relevant to the choice between the alternatives offered might influence one's preferences and offset possible considerations about the misfortune involved in annihilation. For instance, one might be disinclined to enter a limbo state in

[14] *Morality, Mortality, Volume 1*, 49–50.
[15] *Ibid.*, 19.

order to delay the end of one's existence if one would, in so doing, miss opportunities to interact with one's loved ones and lose the thread of one's life.[16] In that case, one might simply find it unbelievable that one's remaining life after waking from the prolonged comatose state would be just as good as it would if one continued one's life without the interruption. Indeed, though Kamm uses this thought experiment to elicit intuitions that accord with the view that annihilation is bad, she too denies it is rational to prefer prolonging existence through limbo, despite the fact that it secures the same quantity of goods. "[S]omeone who cares for the goods [of life] should […] want them sooner rather than later," she explains; "if we put them off, we are resisting the pull of the good, even if we will eventually get these goods anyway […] but the good should be *irresistible*."[17] Alternatively, those who are sympathetic neither to Limbo Man's preference nor to Kamm's explanation of its failure might believe it does not matter whether an *inescapable* misfortune is endured earlier or later.[18] Given such a belief, it is unlikely one would prefer to put off a fixed quantity of goods in order to delay annihilation even if one took the latter itself to be bad for the one annihilated.

A *prima facie* more compelling argument in favour of the view that annihilation is an evil—on either interpretation of this view—is offered by Benatar, who regards this view as correctly implying that death is always the lesser of two evils, even when it is all-things-considered better to die than continue living. That this implication is correct, he suggests, is supported by the fact that it plausibly explains the rationality of certain mourning practises.[19] In particular, it explains why it is rational to grieve in response to the death of a person whose continued existence

[16] See Benatar, *The Human Predicament*, 106.
[17] *Morality, Mortality, Volume 1*, 59.
[18] A misfortune involved in annihilation itself would be inescapable relative to the options offered to Limbo Man, none of which include immortality.
[19] *The Human Predicament*, 107–9.

would have brought *nothing* more of intrinsic value to her, as is the case when, to use Benatar's example, extremely severe disease and palliative treatment of it precludes the possibility of attaining further goods in life. The rationality of mourning someone's death in such circumstances, Benatar argues, can be explained neither by supposing that one's grief is a response to the loss of the person *for oneself*—since in the imagined case meaningful interactions with the person are made impossible by the disease and its treatment—nor by the assumption that one's grief is directed at *the disease*—since then one's mourning would be unreasonably mistimed to coincide with the ending of the bad state of affairs. Nonetheless, because it does seem rational to mourn such a death, it seems plausible that even though death under these circumstances would be overall better for the one who dies, it would be the lesser of two evils rather than entirely harmless. Yet the deprivation account is unable to yield this result without the annihilation account or the valuable container theory as a supplement.

The view that annihilation itself is bad merits further critical assessment. However, for the present, I leave aside further consideration of this view for the later discussion of rational attitudes towards one's death.[20] Though the annihilation account or valuable container theory, if true, exacerbate the problems for any attempt to disarm one's death of its badness, the challenge from the less controversial deprivation account is sufficient to establish that strategies aimed at disarming death of its badness are not worth pursuing.

[20] See section *4.3*.

2.3 Strategies of resistance to evil of death

It remains to be seen whether any of the routes of defending the project of securing invulnerability to the evil of death are plausible. Proponents of resistance to the evil of death might argue against the deprivation account in favour of rival views which allow that the badness of a person's death can be diminished without threatening her expected well-being in the process. Alternatively, they might accept the deprivation account but attempt to show to show how a person can ensure her future would not add significantly to the goodness of her life without acting against her interests. In the following sections, I explore these replies to the challenge from the deprivation account through an assessment of strategies for disarming death which have appeared to hold some promise.

2.3.1 Making one's mark

One idea that pervades literature from ancient times to the present is that death can be neutralized through leaving one's mark on the world. According to the Diotima of Plato's *Symposium*, for example, we seek to triumph over death by leaving traces of ourselves that last beyond the end of our lives, either through our literal offspring or through the "offspring" of our minds—the works we create and deeds we perform which are remembered through the ages. And, in fact, Diotima's view bears some plausibility as a descriptive thesis about human motivation. Some empirical findings in contemporary psychological research suggest that having children, becoming associated with fame, and attaching ourselves to cultural endeavours that transcend the limits of our individual lives helps us deal with anxiety about

death.[21] But does this view have any plausibility as a normative thesis about how we ought to act to avoid facing misfortune in death?

Before attempting to answer that question, something should be said about what kinds of marks left by a person, or traces of her existence, are supposed to perform the role of rendering death harmless. Typically, those who find some intuitive appeal in this strategy of disarming death mention the transmission of one's genes through reproduction, the transmission of one's ideas through works of art and creations more generally, and the remembrance of one's significant deeds by subsequent generations. On the other hand, something like dropping a message in a bottle into the sea only for it to sink to the bottom of the ocean and remain unnoticed forever is not usually thought to be the appropriate kind of mark to leave on the world. The idea seems to be that *some part of a person remains*, in some sense, when appropriate traces of her are left behind—not enough of her for this to count as literal immortality, but enough to take the sting out of her death.[22] However, this vague answer leaves unclarified what relation between one and the marks one leaves behind are required in this context. If one's genetic relation to distant, albeit direct, offspring is apt, then would one's genetic relation to a

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[21] For an overview of this research, see Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg & Tom Pyszczynski, *The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life* (New York, NY: Random House, 2015) 100–21.

[22] Arthur Schopenhauer seems to be alone in regarding even the transformation of one's decomposed corpse into nutrients that fuel organic nature as a profound consolation in the face of one's mortality. He argues that "vital force remains entirely untouched by the change of forms and states, which the bond of cause and effect introduces and carries off again [...] and whoever fears death as his absolute annihilation cannot afford to disdain that the innermost principle of his life remains untouched by it" (*The World as Will and Representation, Volume 2*, Peyne, E. F. J (tr.) (Toronto: The Falcon's Wing Press, 1958) 471). Nonetheless, even here this causal chain following one's decomposition is considered an appropriate trace of oneself just insofar as it supplies—on Schopenhauer's assessment at least—the right sort of connection between the person and the traces of her which persist in this way.

nephew and her offspring be similarly appropriate? And what should we say in cases where someone appears to have left a significant mark on the world when actually her deeds are remembered falsely or her works grossly misinterpreted? What an adequate defence of this strategy requires is answers to these questions in the form of a principled account of what makes something a trace of oneself in the appropriate sense.

Regardless of what traces of oneself are salient, however, it is far from obvious what would motivate the view that one's death is made less of a misfortune through leaving traces of oneself behind. After all, where a person's death prevents her from leading additional life worth living, there is no less of a deprivation of goods if one leaves behind a mark on the world. The proposal simply neglects the challenge from the deprivation account unless it is supported by an alternative view about what makes death bad for the one who dies, but it is not clear that a plausible alternative which supports the efficacy of this strategy is forthcoming. By contrast, while the it does not engage with the reasons many have put forward for thinking that dying earlier rather than later can be a misfortune, it does engage with the reasons some put forward for thinking that the meaningfulness of our lives is threatened by our mortality. Robert Nozick emphasizes the importance of traces along these lines when he writes:

> A significant life leaves its mark on the world. A significant life is, in some sense, permanent; it makes a permanent difference to the world—it leaves traces. To be wiped out completely, traces and all, goes a long way toward destroying the meaning of one's life. […] Attempts to find meaning in life seek to transcend the limits of an individual life. The narrower the limits of life, the less meaningful it is. […] Mortality is a temporal limit and traces are a way of going or

> seeping beyond that limit. To be puzzled about why death seems to undercut meaning is to fail to see the temporal limit as a limit.[23]

Perhaps, then, this strategy is ill-conceived as a way of confronting one's death as a *specific event* whose timing is uncertain but is better understood as a response to *the fact* that one will die. Leaving a mark on the world might be a hopeless means of diminishing the evil of death but a promising manner of dealing with the evil of mortality.

Nevertheless, there are reasons to doubt the efficacy of this strategy conceived as a means of confronting either the evil of one's death or of one's mortality. The most immediate problems are due to the fact that what one attains through leaving one's mark on the world is not *really* immortality, but a faux or quasi-immortality. Arthur Schopenhauer, a philosopher sympathetic to this proposal, concedes that the "permanence" one achieves through the traces left behind is "only as in an image and simile, or rather only as in a shadowy outline".[24] The trouble is that this kind of "permanence" still leaves us without those things we value most about living, the privation of which makes death a misfortune, and the presence of which makes immortality desirable. Woody Allen perhaps put it best when he declared, "I don't want to attain immortality through my work; I want to be immortal through not dying."[25] What one gains through leaving some remnant of oneself behind secures neither one's actual continued existence, nor the goods of experience, such as pleasures, nor the goods of activity, such as those of continuing to *make* one's mark on the world. To leave one's mark behind, Todd May argues,

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[23] Robert Nozick, "Philosophy and the Meaning of Life", repr. in *Life, Death & Meaning: Key Philosophical Readings on the Big Questions*, Benatar, David (ed.) (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004) 72, 81.
[24] *The World as Will and Representation, Volume 2*, 472.
[25] Quoted in Shelly Kagan, *Death*, 313.

> is a small consolation [...] in the face of death. […] I die, and no building bearing my name can stop that. I will no longer awake to see the leaves against the sky, or feel my wife next to me, or hear my kids' voices . My writing will cease. My hopes for and my engagements with this world will come to an end with me. In short, leaving something behind does not leave me behind. In as much as such actions are a bid for immortality, then, they serve only as a poor substitute.[26]

But more trouble lies ahead for this strategy, seeing that what one attains through leaving one's mark on the world is not really *immortality* but a mere delay of complete oblivion, traces and all. Françoise Dastur gives an accurate assessment of this attempt to defeat death when she writes that it "allows us at best only a temporary foreswearing of death" and sustains merely "the delusion of keeping death at a distance".[27] One thinks of Percy Shelly's poem "Ozymandias", in which the written instruction to look upon Ozymandias' works is found ironically placed on the rubble and ruin of his monuments. If we seek to attain the sort of permanence Nozick says belongs to meaningful lives through our descedents or our lasting fame, we are thwarted in our efforts by the fact that bloodlines end, whole species like ours become extinct, and great deeds eventually become forgotten. As for the mark we leave through our works, Julian Barnes expresses the problem well:

> Do we create art in order to defeat, or at least defy, death? To transcend it, to put it in its place? You may take my body, you may take all the squidgy stuff inside my skull where lurks whatever lucidty and imagination I possess, but you cannot take away what I have done with them. Is that our subtext and our motivation? Most probably—though *sub specie aeternitatis* (or even the view of a millennium of two) it's pretty daft. […] Tastes change; truths become

[26] Todd May, *Death*, 84.
[27] Françoise Dastur, *How are We to Confront Death? An Introduction to Philosophy*, Vallier, Robert (tr.) (New York, NY: Fordham University Press) 25, 19.

> clichés; whole art forms disappear. Even the greatest art's triumph over death is risibly temporary. A novelist might hope for another generation of readers—two or three if lucky—which may feel like a scorning of death; but it's really just scratching on the wall of the condemned cell.[28]

Through leaving traces of ourselves, we may hope to stretch beyond the ordinary limits of the human reach to some extent, but against the backdrop of eternality, our efforts make us no less profoundly limited and no less bound for oblivion. If finitude, the presence of such a temporal limit, is a threat to the meaningfulness of one's existence, the small consolation that some part of oneself might linger on for a short while offers very little comfort indeed.[29]

2.3.2 Moderating desire

In his classic paper "Annihilation" (1987) and his book *Invulnerability: On Securing Happiness* (1996), Steven Luper assesses another strategy for seeking invulnerability to the evil of death, tracing its sources in both Western and Eastern ancient philosophy. This is the proposal that death might be rendered harmless, or at least less harmful, by forgoing a certain kind of self-interested concern for continued life. More precisely, the view Luper assesses is that one can diminish the badness of one's death by giving up future-directed desires which one's death might frustrate. Such a strategy for disarming death obviously assumes that the frustration of one's desires play a central role in determining the badness of one's death. But it is important to notice

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[28] Julian Barnes, *Nothing to be Frightened of* (New York, NY: Random House) 205.
[29] In the fifth chapter, I assess at greater length the view that a mortal life is one lacking in meaning (see section *5.4*).

that there is more than one view to that effect to be found in the philosophical literature from recent decades.

In a highly influential paper, Bernard Williams argues that death is bad if and only if it frustrates one's desires, which he supposes it does to certain of one's desires held around the time of one's death.[30] More recently, Christopher Belshaw argues that it is a necessary but not sufficient condition for death to be bad that it frustrates desires held around the time of one's death.[31] Or rather, he clarifies, this is a necessary condition for death to be bad *in a way that matters*; that is, in a way that has implications for the actions and attitudes one ought to adopt regarding death.[32] If Williams and Belshaw are right that the frustration of one's desires is necessary for one's death to be bad, then the deprivation account would be false; a person's death might make her worse off than she would have been, but unless it frustrates the desires she has around the time of her death, it should not count as a misfortune for her.

Williams refers to the class of desires which can be frustrated by death as *categorical* desires, distinguishing them from what he refers to as *conditional* desires: One has a conditional desire for something when one wants it only on the condition that one will be alive to receive it. By contrast, one has a categorical desire for something when one wants it *simpliciter*.[33] While both conditional and categorical desires require one's continued existence

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[30] Bernard Williams, "The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality", repr. in *Life, Death & Meaning: Key Philosophical Readings on the Big Questions*, Benatar, David (ed.) (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004) 334–5. Williams' prose is somewhat cryptic at times, but this is the view many have attributed to him.

[31] Christopher Belshaw, *Annihilation: The Sense and Significance of Death* (Stocksfield: Acumen, 2009) 115–7; "Death, Value, and Desire", *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Death*, Bradley, Ben, Feldman, Fred & Jens Johansson (eds.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); "Victims", *Immortality and the Philosophy of Death*, Cholbi, Michael (ed.) (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

[32] "Victims", 4–9.

[33] "The Makropulos Case", 334–5.

to be satisfied, conditional desires, unlike categorical desires, are not frustrated if one does not continue to exist. Instead, since the condition upon which these desires depend fails to obtain, one's conditional desires are *cancelled* or *rendered null* by one's death.[34] According to Williams' distinction, if a person wants to philosophize tomorrow, then a categorical desire of hers is frustrated if she dies tonight. But if she wants to philosophize tomorrow only on condition that she is alive tomorrow, then her conditional desire has not been frustrated if she dies tonight.

Importantly, the distinction between conditional and categorical desires is not exhaustive, given how Williams defines them. In addition to these kinds of desires, as Samuel Scheffler notices, there are also desires whose satisfaction requires one's death, such as the desire to be a martyr; a subset of such desires which are conditional on one's being dead, such as the desire for one's funeral to be well-attended; and desires whose satisfaction and frustration depends neither on one's continued existence nor on the end of one's existence, such as Scheffler's desire that climate change be reversed, regardless of his being around to witness it.[35]

If the frustration of one's desires at death were a necessary condition for death to be bad, then there would appear to be a promising strategy for disarming death of its badness; one might render oneself invulnerable to the evil of death by abandoning or making sure not to adopt categorical desires. Given Williams and Belshaw's view, in other words, one could diminish the misfortune one faces in death by making sure one has no categorical desires which might be frustrated. Instead of wanting to write a masterpiece or make a scientific discovery, for example, one

[34] Ben Bradley & Kris McDaniel, "Death and Desires", *The Metaphysics and Ethics of Death*, Taylor, James Stacey (ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 122.
[35] Samuel Scheffler, *Death and the Afterlife*, Kolodny, Niko (ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 89–90.

could train oneself to want these things only on condition that one remains alive to do them.

It might seem that the most dubious part of this strategy is that we lack sufficient control over our desires to practise it deliberately. The question of whether we have such control over our desires is undoubtedly a fascinating one. And clearly the appeal of this strategy stands or falls depending on what the answer to this question is. But finding out the answer seems to be a task for empirical psychology, or for the philosophy of psychology, rather than for the philosophy of death. Instead, I think we have reason to reject the view that death is bad only if it frustrates her desires.

2.3.2.1 The disruption of desire

Belshaw raises and responds to an objection to the view death is only bad for a person if it frustrates her desires. Specifically, he revises his account of death's badness in response to what he calls *disruption cases*. In these sorts of cases, a person occupies a temporary state of having no categorical desires, from which she would have emerged were it not for her death.[36] The trouble such cases present for Williams and Belshaw's view is that such a death could be a misfortune despite the lack of categorical desires for death to frustrate. Imagine, to use the standard example, Miss Blue, a teenager who commits suicide during a severe depression, which causes her to temporarily lack any categorical desires at the time of her death. Had she not committed suicide, she would have looked forward to many years of a very good life following the end of this condition. According to the deprivation account, Miss Blue's death is a great misfortune, insofar as it prevents her from coming to lead a life worth living. However, if the frustration of desires is a necessary condition of

[36] "Death, Value, and Desire", 280–2; "Victims", 10–1.

death's badness, then her death is no misfortune at all. Surely, the deprivation account yields the correct result here, while its competitor yields the incorrect result.

In reply, one might try to argue that the misfortune of Miss Blue's death can be explained by the fact that she *previously* held desires of the kind which can be frustrated by death, though she holds no such desires at the time of her death. But this does not appear to be of much help in explaining whether and why her death is a misfortune. We might simply re-imagine the case as one in which the life prevented by death would have been miserable, holding fixed facts about what Miss Blue's desires during her life were. Because the prevention of such a deplorable condition is plausibly regarded as fortunate rather than unfortunate, it seems that an adequate account of death's badness should appeal not to *backward-looking* but to *forward-looking* considerations.

In this vein, Belshaw argues that the evil of Miss Blue's death can be explained if we suppose she would have later regained her past desires, or similar ones, and satisfied many of them.[37] Like the deprivation account, this view allows that death can be bad in virtue of preventing a person from coming to have and satisfy desires she had previously, but it differs from the deprivation account insofar as it denies that death can be bad in virtue of preventing one from forming and satisfying completely new desires. But why should death not be a misfortune in the latter circumstances if it can be one in the former? Though Belshaw's does not answer this question directly, his proposal seems to be that death is a misfortune in the former but not the latter circumstances because only in the former does death "bring to a

[37] "Death, Value, and Desire", 280–1; "Victims", 11.

premature end an unfolding biographical life, or the life of a person".[38] He emphasises that the depressed person, were it not for her suicide, would "pick up the thread of her life".[39]

The problem with this proposal is that it places unreasonably strict demands on the degree of psychological connectedness which is required for periods of a person's life to count as part of the same unfolding biographical life—especially if the premature ending of an unfolding biographical life is taken to be a necessary condition of death's badness. It is implausible to suppose that a biographical life is discontinuous if there is ever a dramatic change in the exact content of a person's desires while also taking the absence of such discontinuity to be required for a person's death to be a misfortune. It is not uncommon for people to undergo radical changes regarding what they desire, and it would be absurd to say death is not a misfortune for anyone who was set for such a transformation. As such, there does not seem to be good reason to accept that death can be bad in virtue of stopping a person from regaining and satisfying old desires while denying that death can be bad in virtue of stopping a person from forming and satisfying new desires. In short, Belshaw's response to the disruption cases fails.[40]

One final response to disruption cases worth considering is to abandon an account of death's badness which centres on the

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[38] "Victims", 11.

[39] "Death, Value, and Desire", 281.

[40] Travis Timmerman does not take issue with Belshaw's reply to the disruption case presented above but argues that Belshaw's revised view is unable to yield the correct result in a variant disruption case in which a person dies but could be brought back to life and thereafter regain her desires; see his "Reconsidering Categorical Desire Views", *Immortality and the Philosophy of Death*, Cholbi, Michael (ed.) (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016) 24–30. The problem is that while Belshaw's view allows that this death is bad for this person, it does not allow that the failure to resuscitate her is bad since once she is dead she would not regain her desires (without intervention). However, I do not consider Timmerman's objection here in detail, as I have argued that Belshaw's reply to the original disruption case is inadequate.

frustration of a person's *actual* desires for one which centres on the frustration of her *idealized* desires. The latter might be understood as the desires she would hold if she possessed all the relevant information about the different possibilities available to her. But the trouble for this view is that if a person's idealized desires were simply desires (of an appropriate intensity) for whatever possibilities maximize her well-being, then this view would be practically equivalent to the deprivation account.[41] On the other hand, if this is not what her idealized desires would be, and her idealized desires would fail to be frustrated by her death even though it would be better for her to continue living, then this view would yield the incorrect result in the disruption case. Either way, though, an account of death's badness based on the notion of idealized desires would not help vindicate the approach to disarming death discussed above.

2.3.2.2 The frustration of desire

The frustration of desire could still be *part* of what makes death bad if comparativism is combined with desire satisfactionism; the view that one is faring well at any time insofar as one's desires are satisfied and faring badly insofar as one's desires are frustrated. Given this combination of views, death could make one worse off both by preventing one's desires from being satisfied and by frustrating one's desires. Once again, one could only avoid being precluded from having one's desires satisfied by ensuring these would not be satisfied anyways, and doing so would clearly not be worthwhile. But it might be less clear whether it would be worthwhile to avoid having one's desires frustrated by abandoning those desires which death could frustrate. Getting clearer on whether this is worth doing, however, requires getting clearer on which of one's desires could be frustrated by death.

[41] Cf. Ben Bradley, *Well-being and Death*, 128.

We seem already have part of the answer from Williams; death poses a threat only to our categorical desires. Noticing this, Steven Luper argues that it would not be worthwhile to abandon those desires which death could frustrate. A life led without holding any categorical desires, he argues, would be a severely impoverished one.[42] He claims, for example, that it is incompatible with having genuine love for another person to desire that the people in our lives fare well only on condition that one is still alive to witness it.[43] But if desire satisfactionism is true, then it would be possible to lead a very good life by satisfying as many non-categorical desires as possible. As such, if a life lead in this manner would, nonetheless, be an impoverished life, this simply shows that desire satisfactionism is false.[44]

However, it could be even clearer which of one's desires might be frustrated by death. Williams, for example, assumes it is all and only the categorical desires a person holds around the time of her death which could be frustrated by it. Is this correct? Answering this question seems to require answering a broader question: Under what conditions is a desire satisfied or frustrated? I argue that once we have rejected an implausible interpretation of desire satisfactionism in favour of the alternative, we are forced to accept that the frustration of desire will only have a relatively insignificant role to play in the misfortune we face in death, if any role at all.

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[42] Steven Luper, "Annihilation", repr. in *Life, Death & Meaning: Key Philosophical Readings on the Big Questions*, Benatar, David (ed.) (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004) 204–16; *Invulnerability: On Securing Happiness* (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 1996) 139–46.

[43] Luper, *The Philosophy of Death*, 77.

[44] David Benatar offers a more general criticism of this sort of desire satisfactionism. He argues its implication that a terrible life could be made magnificent simply through forgoing desires for anything other than what one will get is absurd (*Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) 80).

A relatively straightforward interpretation of desire satisfactionism would have it that a desire for some object is satisfied if that object *ever* obtains and frustrated if it *never* obtains, unless the desire is cancelled. But such a straightforward view falters on cases where one's desires have changed, such that one's past and present desires conflict.[45] To see this, consider that, according to desire satisfactionism, the extent to which it is good for to have one's desire satisfied and bad to have one's desire frustrated is proportionate to the intensity with which the desire is held. Now, imagine, for example, a novelist who has spent weeks desperately wanting to toss his latest manuscript into the fire, unable to do so while it sits on her editor's desk. On the day the manuscript returns to her, she has a change of heart and wants it to be published, though not with anything approaching the intensity with which she wished it to be burned. The present interpretation of desire satisfactionism suggests that, insofar as the novelist cares about her well-being, she should toss the manuscript into the fire on the day it returns to her. This would frustrate her present desires, but it would satisfy her past desires to a greater extent. This implies, more generally, that prudence sometimes requires one to harm oneself in the present to benefit oneself to a greater extent in the past, and to refrain from benefiting oneself in the present because it incurs a greater harm to oneself in the past. This seems absurd.

The problem here arises from allowing that one's desires can be satisfied by events occurring *after* one has ceased to hold those desires. Accordingly, the solution would seem merely to involve appealing to a more constrained interpretation of what it means for desires to be satisfied and frustrated. One might

[45] Richard Brandt argues: "The fundamental difficulty for the desire-satisfaction theory is that desires change over time: Some occurrence I now want to happen may be something I did not want to have happen in the past, and will wish had not happened, if it does happen, in the future" ("Two Conceptions of Utility", *The Limits of Utilitarianism*, Miller, Harian B. & William H. Williams (eds.) (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1982) 179.

argue that a desire for an object is satisfied only if the object obtains *before the desire ceases to be held* and frustrated only if the object fails to obtain *before the desire ceases to be held.* According to this view, unless one continues to hold one's past desires, these will be irrelevant to whether present occurrences are good or bad for one. But this interpretation of desire satisfactionism raises a problem for the view that death can frustrate one's desires. This is because death *eliminates* the desires of the one who dies by taking her out of existence. Part of the complication here is that it is not clear whether death is an event that occurs during a person's lifetime; should we understand death as the last moment of one's existence, the first moment of one's non-existence or some elusive time slice between these? Unless death is an event within one's life, it would not occur at a time when one has dies which could be frustrated. However, even if we understand death as the last moment of one's existence, we would have to concede that none of its effects could frustrate one's desires, since these occur after one ceases to exist. The only desires which could be frustrated by one's death are those whose object fails to obtain *at the very moment it occurs* and fails to obtain then *because* of one's death. These would be, essentially, desires to be doing something other than dying at that moment. The trouble is that it is far from clear that the frustration of such desires would play a significant role in anyone's death; the importance of such desires for one's well-being is likely to pale in comparison to the evil of privation one faces in death.

First excursus: The termination of one's pursuits

A similar dialectic confronts us in reflecting on an account of the evil of death developed by Martha Nussbaum. She argues that death is bad for the one who dies in virtue of terminating certain pursuits that extend over time before their completion, thereby

rendering one's engagement with them "vain" and "empty".[46] "[I]f one invests a lot of time in plans and hopes for the future, engaging in activities the whole point of which is preparatory (say, professional training)," she explains, "an unexpected death can make those activities vain and futile."[47] Putting her view in other terms, Nussbaum writes that "death is bad for the person who has died because of the way in which it alters the intended shape of the activities the person understood in life".[48]

In some respects, this view bears resemblance to Williams' account of death's badness assessed in the previous section. Most importantly, like his account, Nussbaum's account of death's badness makes it a necessary condition of death's being bad for the one who dies that she be oriented to the future in a specific manner around the time of her death. In particular, Nussbaum's view requires that one be involved in temporally-extended pursuits around the time of one's death for it to be bad for one to die. As a result, her account of the evil of death seems to be susceptible to a similar criticism based on disruption cases. One could imagine, for example, the death of someone who occupies a temporary state of having no plans or projects, from which she would have gone on to form new plans and take on projects which would have culminated in success were it not for her death. Nussbaum tries to allay this concern by proposing that there are fundamental pursuits which are nearly always present in a person's life; "even if there should be a person for whom death arrives just as all current projects are, for the moment, complete and at a standstill," she argues, "still, the bare project to form new projects is interrupted."[49] But even supposing this is true, it seems unusual to say the badness of death is such

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[46] *The Therapy of Desire*, 207.
[47] Martha Nussbaum, "The Damage of Death: Incomplete Arguments and False Consolations", *The Metaphysics and Ethics of Death,* Taylor, James Stacey (ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 29.
[48] "The Damage of Death", 29.
[49] *The Therapy of Desire*, 209.

cases is exhausted by the termination of one's implicit project to form new projects. Surely, the misfortune of being prevented from bringing the new projects one would form to completion should not be neglected or disregarded.

There is another way of retaining some of Nussbaum's insights, which accounts more plausibly for the evil of death in disruption cases. We might turn to achievementism; the view that what makes life go well is achievement and what makes life go badly is failure. Achievementism differs from desire satisfactionism in requiring that one be actively involved in bringing about some outcome for it to contribute to one's well-being. The view that death is bad in virtue of terminating one's pursuits is entailed and explained by coupling comparativism with achievementism. Given this combination of views, it would be a great misfortune for someone to be prevented by death from acquiring new pursuits and bringing these to completion, even when she currently has no plans or projects which death could terminate.

As with desire satisfactionism, though, the plausibility of achievementism depends on how one understands the central notion of achievement, and the possibilities for interpretation parallel those available regarding desire satisfactionism. According to one interpretation of achievementism, one achieves an end if one's efforts ensure it is realized *at any time* and one fails to achieve it if that end is *never* realized. But this view, like the first version of desire satisfactionism discussed earlier, falters on cases in which one's ambitions have changed, such that what one's past and present pursuits conflict. Typically, achievementists claim that the extent to which it is good for one to achieve something and bad to fail to achieve it is proportionate to the effort one has invested into bringing about that outcome. So, we might imagine a case in which someone has invested a lot of effort into some project which is set for completion but now pursues something which requires thwarting the success of this past project. We might imagine a politician who has worked for

years to bring about the dissolution of the monarchy in her country and has brought this to a point where it is set to happen. Like our novelist in the previous section, however, she has experienced a change of heart. In the last few weeks, she has been working to ensure the royal family remains in power. Eventually, she realizes she can bring this about without too much effort expended—by exposing the corruption of and defaming her former, anti-monarchist political party. According to the present interpretation of achievementism, insofar as the politician cares about her own well-being, she should refrain from jeopardizing her past pursuits, even though this would constitute success in her present pursuits. But, again, this is an implausible result.

Just as the problem here mirrors that for desire satisfactionism, the solution would seem likewise to involve appealing to a more constrained interpretation of the concepts of achievement and failure. It might be argued that one achieves an end one is pursuing only if it is realized as a result of one's efforts *before one ceases to pursue it* and fails to achieve it only if that end is not realized *before one ceases to pursue it*. Of course, this interpretation of achievementism could only be plausible given a broad understanding of what it means to be pursuing something. As Ben Bradley notices, "the efforts put in to achieve something often do not overlap in time with the obtaining of the object of the efforts; nor does anyone particularly care whether they do".[50] The novelist who sets out to write a bestseller, for example, is not still writing her book at the time it becomes a bestseller. If this version of achievementism is to be plausible, then, we should be able to count someone as pursuing an outcome at a given time despite not literally putting in effort at that time to bring it about—perhaps if, among other things, they continue to wish for that outcome to obtain.

However, the trouble is that given this second interpretation of achievementism, it is not clear that death can really be said to

[50] *Well-being and Death*, 22.

render our pursuits into failures. Even given a broad understanding of what it means to be pursuing something, one could not be engaged in such pursuits after one has died. Nor could one be engaged in such pursuits at the moment death occurs, unless we see death as an event which takes place during one's life. But, taking that route, we would be forced to say the only pursuits which could be transformed into failures by one's death are those whose object fails to obtain *at the very moment it occurs* and fails to obtain then *because* of one's death. These would be, essentially, pursuits which aim at doing something else at that moment besides dying. It is doubtful that such failures—say, failure in the pursuit of mere survival—should play a very significant role in how bad one's death is, when placed alongside the evil of privation we face in death.[51]

2.3.3 Making the most of life

If we cannot escape death, can we at least render it harmless? In Frederich Hölderlin's poem "To the Fates", the speaker asks the goddesses of fate to grant him only one more summer and autumn to perfect his art and make his final poetic achievement. With just so much of life promised, the speaker continues:

> Then welcome, silence, welcome cold world of shades!
> I'll be content, though here I must leave my lyre
> And songless travel down; for *once* I

[51] There is a kernel of truth in Nussbaum's remarks on death which remains untouched by the failure of the views considered above. To have invested a lot of time and effort in activities which are preparatory only to have these terminated before they culminate in success is to have *wasted* one's time and effort; one would have been better off pursuing ends which would have been realized within one's lifetime. The tragedy, of course, us that one often only knows how one should most efficiently make use of one's time and effort after the opportunity to change how one lives has passed.

> Lived like the gods, and no more is needed.[52]

In his discussion of Hölderlin's poem, Walter Kaufmann endorses the basic idea behind the speaker's plea. He writes, quoting Hölderlin:

> [D]eath can cut off a man before he had a chance to give his life a meaning […] Not only in childhood but long after that one may retain the feeling that one is in this sense still at the mercy of death. "But once what I am bent on, what is holy, my poetry, is accomplished," once I have succeeded in achieving—in the face of death, in a race with death—a project that is truly mine […] then the picture changes: I have won the race and in a sense have triumphed over death.[53]

Hölderlin and Kaufmann are not merely offering the feeble consolation that once important goods have been attained in life, it is no longer possible for death to deprive us of *those* good which we have already enjoyed, even though it is able to preclude us from those not yet acquired. On the contrary, they hold onto the prospect of being able to *welcome* death, having *triumphed* over it. The idea which grips these authors seems to be that the attainment of certain goods during one's life offers a buffer against the evil of death. If this view is plausible, it would be possible to diminish the badness of one's death by making the most of one's life. That would certainly be an attractive way of reducing the misfortune faced in the ending of one's life, especially if it could be pursued from early on in life. Following Ben Bradley, I call this approach to resisting the evil of death *the Hölderlin strategy*.[54]

Of course, Kaufmann construes this approach to disarming death of its badness narrowly by focussing on only one manner

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[52] Hölderlin, Frederich, "To the Fates", repr. in *Selected Poems and Fragments*, Hamburger, Michael (tr.) (New York, NY: Penguin, 1994) 7.
[53] Walter Kauffmann, "Death", repr. in *The Faith of a Heretic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013) 370.
[54] See his *Well-being and Death*, 156.

in which a person can promote her well-being; that is, by making her life more meaningful through significant accomplishments. But this strategy might be construed more broadly, in a way that involves promoting one's well-being along any dimension. Still, it is not entirely obvious what would motivate either a narrow or broad interpretation of the strategy. Neither Hölderlin's poem nor Kaufman's remarks on it point straightforwardly to an explanation of how the completion of an important plan, or any other improvement to how well one is faring, could mitigate against the misfortune one faces in death.

What makes matters more difficult is that the deprivation account, as it is ordinarily construed, seems opposed to the possibility of resisting the evil of death through the Hölderlin strategy. The central idea that motives Hölderlin and Kaufmann is that the badness of one's death is determined in some way by the goodness of one's life *in the past*. By contrast, according to the deprivation account, death is a misfortune for the one who dies if and only if *the future* of which she was deprived would have added significantly to the goodness of her life as a whole. As such, if the Hölderlin strategy is holds any promise, it must either be because the goodness of one's life in the past plays a significant role in determining how good one's future could be or because the deprivation account is false.

2.3.3.1 Narrativism about lifetime well-being

In the sketch of the deprivation account presented in this chapter so far, it has been assumed that the value of one's life as a whole is simply the sum of the value of all the moments within one's life. One way of accounting for the possibility that the misfortune suffered in death is lessened by the goodness of one's life in the past is to reject this view in favour of narrativism about lifetime well-being. According to narrativism, the value of one's life as a whole cannot be determined by adding together all the

momentary goods in that life and subtracting the momentary evils. Instead, to determine the overall value of a life, one must also take into consideration the *global* properties of that life, including the relations that obtain between its parts.

Combined with the deprivation account, narrativism has some provocative implications concerning the prudential value of death. If the extent to which periods of a life contribute to its overall value depends partially on the manner this period affects its global properties, then to determine death's value one must look to how the counterfactual future prevented by death would relate to the life led up to this point. In principle, this allows that how a person has lived until the end of her life can affect the extent to which her death is a misfortune.

There are different varieties of the narrativist view. To begin with, narrativists disagree about which global properties are relevant to determining the value of one's life as a whole and about whether these global properties must be related to the distribution of momentary goods within that life. One popular view is that the temporal ordering of periods of life in which one fares well and fares badly—or the "shape" of one's life—affects the degree to which these periods contribute to the overall value of one's life. In particular, a principle commonly endorsed is that experiencing an inclining distribution of momentary goods is better than experiencing a declining distribution of momentary goods, even if the sum of these momentary goods is held constant.[55] On other narrativist views, the relevant global properties are narratable features of one's life which do not necessarily involve any specific distribution of momentary well-being across one's lifetime.[56] On these views, lives are better or worse all-

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[55] See, for instance, F. M. Kamm, "Rescuring Ivan Ilych: How We Live and How We Die", repr. in *Bioethical Prescriptions: To Create, End, Choose and Improve Lives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) 19.

[56] See, for instance, Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 1981) 190–209.

things-considered at least partly in virtue of the stories which they instantiate.

What's more, the narrativist view is also defended with varying scope. According to versions of narrativism with greater scope, it is possible for the amount a period of life contributes to its overall value to be not only enhanced or discounted due to the presence of desirable or undesirable global features, respectively, but *transvalued* too. That is to say, it is possible for a period of one's life in which one fares well at each moment to ultimately detract from the goodness of one's whole life, when that period introduces undesirable global properties, and for a period of one's life in which one fares badly at each moment to ultimately increase the goodness of one's whole life, when that period introduces desirable global properties. Thus, as David Velleman notices, if the deprivation account is combined with this narrativist view, it follows that

> [a] person may be rationally willing to die even though he can look forward to a few more good weeks or months; and a person may be rationally unwilling to die even though he can look forward only to continued adversity. The rationality of the patient's attitude depends on whether an earlier or later death would make a better ending to his life story.[57]

But intriguing as this result may be, it has some unpalatable implications regarding when a person has prudential reasons to commit suicide. It would be bizarre, to say the least, to accept that prudence requires a person to end her own life in order to escape a future in which she fares well at each moment but ruins the narrative structure of her life as a whole—and it is very doubtful that this is an area in which any proponents of narrativism would be willing to put their view into practise! Yet this is exactly what this version of the narrativist view seems to entail.

[57] David Velleman, "Well-being and Time", repr. in *The Metaphysics of Death*, Fischer, John (ed.) (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993) 347.

It appears more plausible, therefore, to restrict the significance of the global properties of a life such that these at most *enhance* and *discount* whatever value or disvalue a period of life *already has* in virtue of its intrinsic properties.

Nevertheless, with any version of narrativism in place, our prospects for disarming death of its badness in a manner which is not self-defeating are not any better than they are without narrativism. Certainly, narrativism introduces a novel method of diminishing the misfortune one faces in death; it allows that one can lessen the badness of one's death by making sure the future it prevents would have caused one's life to have undesirable narrative features. However, this is no more in our interests to pursue than the methods allowed by the deprivation account without narrativism. If disarming death by ensuring the future prevented by one's death lacks more momentary goods than evils is akin to destroying one's prized possessions to avoid their theft, disarming death by ensuring one's future is expected to have undesirable narrative features is akin to tarnishing those possessions so that one loses nothing of value in losing them.

To see this, consider how one might attempt to put this strategy into practise. Given the view that the shape of a life—the temporal ordering of good and bad periods within it—influences its overall value, one would have to make sure one's life is headed for a decline in quality which death prevents. Similarly, if it were not the shape of a life which matters for its overall value but the stories it instantiates, then one would have to make sure the future prevented by one's death would have been a bad ending to one's biography. At best, one neither promotes nor detracts from how well one fares by doing this, but at worst—if one's efforts are mistimed with respect to the date of one's demise—one has to endure the suboptimal condition one has secured for the future; one has to face the decline in one's momentary well-being, the terrible closing chapter one hoped would be edited from one's biography or whatever unwelcome future

one has put in place. For these reasons, this is not a strategy worth pursuing.

2.3.3.2 The exhaustibility of life's goodness

One interpretation of the declaration in Hölderlin's poem that "no more is needed" once one has achieved success, and of Kaufmann's claim that one thereby triumphs over death, is that these are motivated by the view that one can reduce the badness of one's death by *exhausting* the prudential goods available in life; that is, by leading a life so excellent with respect to these goods that no more of them could be obtained. If it were possible to do this, then the goodness of one's life in the past *would* play a significant role in determining how good one's future could be. More importantly, if it were possible to do this, then one could apparently ensure that the future of which death deprives one would be fruitless without depriving oneself of goods one might ever have had, but instead making sure one has had as much of these goods as it is possible for anyone to have.

Of course, it would not be possible to exhaust the goods in life unless the they were such that one can have only so much of them. Consequently, this defence of the Hölderlin strategy would be in trouble if either pleasure or the satisfaction of desires contribute to one's well-being, since there is, in principle, no cap on the extent to which a person might experience pleasure or satisfy her desires. This seems immediately to be a red flag for this proposal.

Steven Luper argues it would be possible to exhaust life of its goodness on the assumption that the sole component of well-being is the satisfaction of desires of a particular kind; namely, desires to achieve something essential to one's life plan.[58] This is because a person can satisfy these desires early on, if her life

[58] Steven Luper, "Exhausting Life", *The Journal of Ethics*, 17/1 (2013) 110–1.

plan allows, and thereafter have no further desires whose satisfaction death can prevent. However, this unreasonably assumes that a person's life plan is not malleable. Surely, those who live beyond the ending marked by their life plans would revise these and strive to make achievements with respect to the new, extended plan. Death would then deprive them of further goods if it prevented this from happening. Indeed, on this view of well-being, it would be imprudent for one *not* to revise one's life plan in these circumstances, otherwise one might end up in a prolonged condition of acquiring no further goods if death comes significantly later than one's life plan assumed.

Kaufmann grounds his remarks in the assumption that achievements make one's life more meaningful. However, while some grant that meaning in life is a component of well-being, apparently no one is ready to say the former is *entirely* constitutive of the latter or that one can confer meaning on one's life *only* through achievement. Besides, even if all this were assumed, death might deprive a person of further good life if it prevented her from making further achievements. To pursue this defence of the Hölderlin strategy further, one would have to make the additional assumption that continued achievement involves diminishing returns in prudential value. But there does not seem to be any good reason to suppose it should necessarily be less in one's interests, say, to have great success as a novelist if one has already had great success as a philosopher.

To move further away from Kaufmann's explicit remarks, the exhaustibility of life's goodness might be defended if one assumes the only prudential goods are those associated with particular global properties of a person's life, such as narrative unity, which can obtain early on in that life. This conception of well-being would, though, have the bizarre implication that it is just one's *whole life* which is a bearer of intrinsic value and that its parts can have such value only instrumentally, as means to acquiring the requisite global properties. More troubling still, it

would yield the absurd result that whenever the relevant global features are expected to obtain only very late in a person's life, it would not be any worse for her to die early in life than right before these features obtain. So, if a person's life were set to have narrative unity, for example, only by the time she was sixty years old, it would be no worse for her to die at twenty-one than at fifty-nine, given this view, because either way death would deprive her of the same goods.[59] This rationale for the Hölderlin strategy thus ultimately fails too.

2.3.3.3 Previous gains & the evil of death

The most straightforward defence of the Hölderlin strategy, which we consider last, would be to substitute the deprivation account of the evil of death for another account which construes the badness of one's death a function of the goodness of one's life leading up to death. One might endorse the *previous gains* account of death's badness introduced by Jeff McMahan, according to which "the badness of death is inversely proportional to the extent to which the life it ends was good overall".[60] On this view, the Hölderlin strategy would be effective; by maximizing the goodness of one's life, one would minimise the misfortune faced in its permanent end. This is certainly an attractive result.

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[59] *Contra* Jeff McMahan, who argues that death would be less bad for a person if it prevented her from attaining desirable global properties earlier in life, because "as one's life becomes more defined, the narrative significance of succeeding events becomes increasingly important", such that "[w]hen the story is well advanced, its narrative structure may demand completion in a limited number of ways" (*The Ethics of Killing: Problems at the Margins of Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 176). While it should be conceded that there are a greater number of *possibilities* earlier on in life for making sure desirable global properties obtain, this is not relevant to the extent to which death deprives a person of goods associated with them. All that is relevant is whether these properties would or would not have obtained were it not for the person's death.

[60] *The Ethics of Killing*, 136.

But beyond mere wishful thinking, why might one accept the previous gains account?

The previous gains account receives *prima facie* support from a pair of cases that present a problem for the deprivation account. In both cases, a person is deprived of the same quantity of goods by her death, but in the first case this is after a life abundant in goods while in the second death comes after a life containing few goods. To render this more vividly, we might picture a couple of young newlyweds, Mr. and Mrs. Pink, who have radically differing pasts; Mr. Pink has grown up in an enviroment of luxury and led a charmed life, while Mrs. Pink's young life has been one of adversity and strife. The couple were about to begin a successful and shared career in some important field when they both died in a motor vehicle accident. Had the accident not occurred, they would have died together in another fatal accident a decade later. During the intervening period, each would have fared equally well, due to the presence of similar goods—in particular, those which arise from the accomplishments in their shared work, the luxuries of their shared living enviroment and the fulfilment each finds in a loving marriage. Many readers may think that death is a greater misfortune for Mrs. Pink, whose life has contained fewer goods at the time of death, than for Mr. Pink, whose life has been abundant in goods. The previous gains account plausibly explains this intuition, whereas the deprivation account conflicts with it.[61]

[61] This thought experiment is adapted from one which McMahan claims offers *prima facie* support for the previous gains account; see *The Ethics of Killing*, 135–6. In McMahan's pair of examples, two people die under conditions which make it nomologically impossible for them to have continued living, but in the first case this is after a long life abundant in goods while in the second death proceeds a shorter life containing few goods. McMahan's thought experiment introduces some additional complexity, since he argues that *death* is not a misfortune in either case because there was no realistic possibility of continued existence. Instead, he identifies the misfortune suffered by both as that of *having no further goods in prospect*. McMahan's "realism condition" is addressed in the fourth chapter; see section *4.3.3.*

However, the previous gains account goes wrong in determining the value of one's death based *only* on the value of one's life leading up to death. That this is so is shown by another thought experiment which inverts the trajectories of the lives in the previous two cases. Imagine a pair of twins, Mr. Purple and Ms. Purple, whose fortunate circumstances and commonalities in temperament have led to a childhood and adolescence for each which is not only exceptionally good but equally so for both of them. Tragically, the twins pass away suddenly, at the brink of adulthood, in a motor vehicle accident. Had it not been for the accident, Mr. Purple would have continued to lead an excellent life, full of accomplishment, enriching relationships and personal fulfilment. But his sister, Ms. Purple, would have soon developed a debilitating chronic illness and, as a result, led a life racked with pain and lacking in the goods enjoyed by her sibling. In this thought experiment, it seems that Mr. Purple's death is a greater misfortune than Ms. Purple's. It is plausible, in fact, that death is overall good fortune for Ms. Purple, since it is all-things-considered better for her to have died than endured a condition that involves significantly more evils than goods. In this pair of cases, the deprivation account yields the correct result, while the previous gains account yields the incorrect result.[62]

With these sorts of problems in mind, McMahan proposes—and endorses—a third view on the evil of death which places the preclusion of further goods at the centre of death's badness but allows a role for previous gains in life to affect its degree of badness too. According to him, the deprivation account ought to be supplemented by the view that the evil of being precluded from a future worth having is *discounted* to the extent that one's life

[62] Indeed, given the stipulation that the twins had previously gained very much from life, the latter account might absurdly entail that both face a death in which there is *neither* significant good fortune nor misfortune.

has been overall good.[63] The better a life has been by its end, the less significant the prevention of further good is—even if, as McMahan proposes, "whenever the future promises to be worth living [...] death poses a threat of loss that cannot be *fully nullified* by any degree of [...] previous gain from life".[64] On this view, the value of one's death is a function both of the value of the future of which death deprives one as well as that of the life one has led.[65]

This augmented version of the deprivation account has the explanatory advantages of both the unaugmented deprivation account and previous gains account relative to the scenarios just described. In the first pair of cases, the deprivation account augmented by the *previous gains discount* view explains why death is a greater misfortune for the one whose life has been worse; the lack of goods in this person's life provides less to mitigate against the misfortune she faces in death. The augmented account also explains our judgements about the pair of cases in which two people have had equally good lives but one is deprived of an excellent future by death while the other is prevented from living a miserable life. This is because, on the augmented account, the value of a person's death is determined first of all by whether her continued life would have been worth living.

Importantly, combined with the previous gains discount supplement, the deprivation account allows for the possibility that one can disarm death of its badness by optimizing the goodness

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[63] *The Ethics of Killing*, 144.

[64] *Ibid.*, 140.

[65] Notably, McMahan is silent on the issue of whether, when death is overall good for the one who dies, the goodness or badness of her past life affects the extent to which her death is good. I doubt many would find it plausible to suppose so. If two individuals were both prevented by their deaths from enduring equally horrible continued lives, but one individual's life had been overall good while the other's had been overall bad, it is far from obvious that either would have met a better fate in death than the other. It seems the previous gains discount supplement is best understood as *asymmetrical* with respect to deaths which are overall bad and which are overall good, insofar as previous gains affect the value of the former but not the latter.

of one's life. In other words, it vindicates an interpretation of the Hölderlin strategy. What's more, it does so without requiring that one ensure continued existence beyond the time of one's death would have been fruitless. Accordingly, if the augmented version of the deprivation account is plausible, then one can act in such a way as to reduce the misfortune one might face in death *while promoting one's interests*. It thus avoids the challenge the unaugmented deprivation account presents for the resistance of mortal misfortune. Finally, it provides a more practicable means of disarming death, since its success need not depend crucially on the timing of one's death.

However, it is not clear that the intuitions which motivate the proposed supplement to the deprivation can withstand further scrutiny. The fundamental problem for the previous gains discount view lies in determining which evils ought to be discounted for previous gains. Clearly, it cannot be the case that *any* event which is bad for a person is less significantly so if her life has been good. As Ben Bradley puts the point, "[h]aving been well-off in the past does not give me a magic shield against misfortunes generally".[66] Otherwise, it would have to be less bad for a person who has led an excellent life to suffer poor health or a painful injury. On the other hand, it would be arbitrary to say the misfortune faced in *death* should be discounted based on the degree of goodness of a life without a rationally-compelling principle to distinguish between the prudential evils which are subject to discount for previous gains and those which are not. In the absence of such a principle, we must either accept that *all* evils are subject to discount or deny that *any* are—that is, abandon the previous gains discount supplement. Though the previous gains discount view has some *prima facie* support from intuitions elicited in the example of the newlyweds, it would be more absurd to apply it so broadly than to abandon its implications regarding this case.

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[66] *Well-being and Death*, 168.

A natural solution is to argue that all evils of privation ought to be discounted for previous gains. The motivating idea could be that whenever one's life has been good in the past, it is less important that there be further goods in one's future. However, as Bradley notices, this proposal is untenable; evils of privation cannot be as neatly demarcated as this supposes.[67] Consider that an event which is extrinsically bad might also be intrinsically good. An episode of pleasure, for instance, is plausibly an intrinsically good state for a person but may also be extrinsically bad for her if prevents the attainment of further goods. We can, of course, separate conceptually the deprivation and the non-deprivational aspects of such an event. Nevertheless, it seems bizarre to suggest that whether an event which both provides and precludes some prudential value is *overall* a benefit to a person depends on whether she has previously fared well; it seems bizarre to suggest one must first calculate how the badness of the preclusion should be discounted. It might be tempting to reply with the proposal that only events which preclude one's attaining something intrinsically good *without* causing intrinsic goods or evils are to be discounted for previous gains. But not only would this reply be *ad hoc*, it might even be of no use in arguing that the badness of death should be so discounted if the annihilation account of death's badness were correct and the permanent ending of a person's existence was intrinsically bad for her.

Second excursus: Losing versus lacking

The claim that the misfortune an individual faces in death is *reduced* by the goodness of her life pulls in the opposite direction to a view defended by Frances Kamm, according to which death

[67] See *Well-being and Death*, 169.

is a *greater* misfortune for an individual insofar as it causes her to suffer the loss of goods already present in her life.[68] On Kamm's view, death sometimes involves, in addition to the misfortune of *lacking* further goods in one's life, the further misfortune of *losing* the goods already present in one's life—which is absent when one is merely precluded from having them altogether. Unlike the previous gains account, Kamm's view posits that death is, *ceteris paribus*, worse for the one who dies when it ends a life abundant in goods than when it ends a life lacking in goods. Nevertheless, she is modest about how significant this additional misfortune is, suggesting that it is *overall* better to have led a good life and suffered a more profound loss in death than to have led a life lacking in goodness to avoid this harm.[69] But why should it be worse at all for death to bring about losses in additional to mere privations?

The most obvious reason to think so is that losing something good to which one has become accustomed or to which one has grown attached tends to have greater negative effects on one's experience of that loss. If—*contra* Alfred Tennyson's famous poem *In Memoriam*—it is better never to have loved than to have loved and lost, this is probably because losing someone one loves is much more devasting and agonizing than simply never loving someone. But this kind of explanation is obviously inapplicable to the losses brought about by death, on the assumption that one ceases to exist at death and so ceases to have experiences after death.

As such, to explain why *death* is a greater misfortune for the person who dies insofar as it causes the loss of goods, Kamm takes a different route, proposing that this is because such losses expose the *weakness* and *vulnerability* of the one who dies and involve a *decline* from a good state of affairs to the complete

[68] *Morality, Mortality, Volume 1*, 25–74.
[69] *Ibid.*, 56–7.

absence of goods.[70] In describing her view, she refers to these as "Insult Factors" involved in death. The trouble is, Kamm's claim that having one's weakness and vulnerability exposed and enduring a decline are *themselves* evils—apart from their possible negative effects on experience—seems just as in need of support as her claim that the loss of the goods of life is *itself* an evil—apart from its possible negative effects on experience. This is not to deny that there might be "Insult Factors" which should feature as part of a complete account of death's badness, but merely to point out that Kamm has not provided any compelling reason to think there are.[71]

Conclusion

If death is an evil of privation, then there is not anything worthwhile to be done now to ensure that death, whenever it comes, will not be bad for one. The only way to make sure death will not be bad for one is to ensure that the future it precludes would not have been good—that is, to preclude oneself from the very goods which death threatens. But if death is an evil, it *is* most plausibly an evil of privation: The badness of death does not consist in its frustration of our desires or its rendering our projects and plans vain. Neither does the badness of death depend on the goodness of the life which proceeded it. The question remains, however, whether the view that death is an evil can withstand the challenge presented against it by Epicurus.

[70] *Morality, Mortality, Volume 1*, 40–2.

[71] At the same time, to be fair to Kamm, it is not entirely clear that she sets out to do this rather than merely explain what motivates certain, possibly erroneous, intuitions about when death is bad for the one who dies.

3
The Evil of Death

> This is a special way of being afraid
> No trick dispels. Religion used to try,
> That vast moth-eaten musical brocade
> Created to pretend we never die,
> And specious stuff that says No rational being
> Can fear a thing it will not feel, not seeing
> That this is what we fear—no sight, no sound,
> No touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with,
> Nothing to love or link with,
> The anaesthetic from which none come round.
>
> Philip Larkin[1]

3.1 The time of the evil of death

Recall Epicurus' provocative challenge to view that death is an evil: "[D]eath [...] is nothing to us, since so long as we exist, death is not with us; but after death comes, then we do not exist."[2] Epicurus is often interpreted as endorsing the following argument: For something to be bad for someone, it must be bad for her at some time. But there is no time at which death is bad for the one who dies. Death cannot be bad for someone while she is alive, because it has not yet occurred, and it cannot be bad for her after she has died, because she ceases to exist at her death. Therefore, death cannot be bad for the one who dies.

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[1] "Aubade", 190.
[2] "Letter to Menoeceus", 31.

This formulation of the argument may or may not represent what Epicurus had in mind when he wrote his famous remarks. Yet regardless of whether it does, it generates a challenge which is not very easily answered. Of course, that challenge is not simply to assess whether this argument is sound. As it is formulated above, it is clearly not sound. To show there is no time at which death is bad, Epicurus cannot merely show that death is not bad *before* it happens or *after* it happens. He also needs to show that death is not bad *at* the time it occurs. This might require coming to some decision about whether death should be considered an event which occurs during one's life or not—whether it counts as the last moment of one's existence, the first moment of one's non-existence or as some elusive time slice between these.

Yet few who think death is an evil would accept that death can be bad for someone only at the moment one dies.[3] Perhaps the evils of death are legion, but death is most fundamentally an evil of privation; death is a misfortune primarily in virtue of what it precludes. But it would be absurd to say of other events which are evils of privation that these are bad only at the time the event occurs. To be precluded from having more of a good life by being in a coma for several years, for example, is not bad only at the moment one falls into the coma. And there is no reason to regard death as an exception to this rule.

Those who seek to account for the evil of death are thus burdened with at least one of two difficult tasks in replying to Epicurus' argument. One option is to show how death could be bad for someone without being bad at any specific time. Alternatively, another way of responding to the argument is to supply an unproblematic time at which death is bad for the one who dies. Doing this in turn requires showing how death could be bad

[3] An exception here is Julian Lamont, "A Solution to the Puzzle of when Death Harms its Victims", *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 76/2 (1998) 198–212.

for someone before it happens or after it happens (or both), unless one accepts that death can be bad only when it occurs. To Epicurus' credit, all of these routes of response appear very counterintuitive, at first glance.

So, the question is: If death is bad for someone, at which times is it bad? According to comparativism, an event is overall bad for someone if the intrinsic value of her whole life is greater in the closest possible world in which that event does not occur. The deprivation account applies this general principle to the event of a person's death. Given this view, one way of reading the question is this: If the value of one's whole life greater in the closest possible world in which the specific event of one's death does not occur, at which times is this so? The answer to this question seems to be: At all times. Or so Fred Feldman argues.[4] After all, it is always true that the value of a person's whole life in one world is greater than that in another world, in the same way that it is always true that 200 is greater than 100.

There is undoubtedly something insightful about Feldman's solution to Epicurus' challenge. But there is also something misguided about it. If comparativism is true, the same story could be told about *anything* which is overall bad for someone. For an injury to be overall bad for someone, the value of her whole life must be greater in the closest possible world in which the injury does not occur. But if asked when it was bad to have suffered the injury, it would be incredible to answer that it is bad *eternally*. The problem is that questions about when an event is bad are ambiguous, and this ambiguity is met in our original question about when death is bad. Feldman answers the question: At which times is it *true* that someone's death is bad for her? However, the question at the heart of Epicurus' challenge is rather: At which times is it true that someone's death is bad for her *at that time*?[5]

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[4] *Confronting the Reaper*, 153–5.

[5] Neil Feit, "The Time of Death's Misfortune", *Noûs* 36/3 (2002) 372–3.

Among those who think death is an evil, there is no clear consensus about what the correct answer to this question is. That should be expected, though. If death is bad for someone in virtue of making her worse off than she would have been, then the times at which death is bad are those times she is worse off than she would have been. In other words, the times at which death is bad are those times when one's level of well-being is lower in the actual world than in the closest possible world in which one's death did not occur. But what one's well-being level is at different times differs according to competing theories of well-being. These are the subject of great controversy. Furthermore, what one's well-being level is during times one no longer exists is also the subject of controversy. Most philosophers assume one's well-being level while deceased cannot be either positive or negative. Some assume that one's well-being level after death is neutral and thus can be numerically represented as *zero*. However, others argue that one has no well-being level after death—not even a neutral one. In terms of numerical representation, it should be left *undefined*.[6] It is the apparent intractability of these issues which makes questions about the time of the evil of death appear intractable.

[6] It is worth noticing that neither of these views are in tension with the view that being annihilated is intrinsically bad for the one who dies. Regardless of whether the value of *not existing* is neutral or undefined, *being taken out of existence* could have negative value for someone. It is also worth noticing that the problem of locating the time at which something is *intrinsically* bad for someone is far less difficult than locating the time at which something is *extrinsically* bad. The time at which some event which is intrinsically bad is so is plausibly the time at which it occurs. One's annihilation could take place in an instant or occur over a period of time, given different interpretations of what it means to be annihilated. Importantly, though, even if annihilation is instantaneous, that need not imply that the magnitude of its badness is insignificant.

3.1.1 The timing problem and well-being

It is helpful to begin by taking notice of the role different views about well-being play in determining the time of death's badness. For convenience's sake, assume for now that one's well-being level while deceased is zero. Now, given several different conceptions of well-being, one is worse off for dying at the time death occurs and times afterwards. Take *hedonism*; the view that one is faring well at any time insofar as one is experiencing pleasure and faring badly insofar as one is experiencing pain. If hedonism is true, there are no events which are bad for someone before the events happen. Though one could be worse off in *contemplating* a future event if doing so diminishes one's pleasurable experiences or increases one's painful experiences, events *themselves* can only affect how much pleasure and pain one experiences from when these occur. Death would be no exception to this. If hedonism is true, one would be worse off for dying at all those times after one's death when one would have been experiencing more pleasure than pain. This could include the moment of death itself, if one would have been experiencing pleasure at that moment were one not dying. For the most part, though, the evil of death will be located at times after one has died.[7]

The time of death's badness would be similar given a certain interpretation of *desire satisfactionism*; the view that one is faring well at any time insofar as one's desires are satisfied and faring badly insofar as one's desires are frustrated. On one interpretation of this view, a desire for an object is satisfied only if

[7] Sometimes Epicurus is interpreted as arguing that death is not an evil on the basis of hedonism. The idea is that while the dying process might be painful, neither death nor the oblivion which follows can be. However, hedonism only supports Epicurus' views about the value of death if comparativism is false. If comparativism is true, an event can be overall bad for someone despite not being intrinsically bad for her, if it prevents her from having a better life; see section *3.3* below.

the object obtains *before the desire ceases to be held* and frustrated only if the object fails to obtain *before the desire ceases to be held.* Given this view, death could be bad for someone at the time it occurs and at times after she has died if it prevents her from satisfying desires at these times. And assuming that one can still have desires at the moment death occurs, death could also be bad at that time if it frustrates some of those desires. But death could not be bad before it happens; it could not prevent one's desires from being satisfied in the past and could not frustrate any of one's past desires which were dropped before the time of one's death.

Nearly the same could be said about the time of death's badness given a certain interpretation of *achievementism*; the view that one is faring well at any time insofar as one achieves the ends one is pursuing and faring badly insofar as one fails to achieve them. According to one interpretation of this view, one achieves an end one is pursuing only if it is realized as a result of one's efforts *before one ceases to pursue it* and fails to achieve it only if that end is not realized *before one ceases to pursue it*.[8] Given this view, death could be bad for someone at the time it occurs and at times after she has died if it prevents her from completing her pursuits at those times. And assuming that one can still be pursuing something at the moment death occurs, death could also be bad at that time if it renders some of those pursuits vain. But again, death could not be bad before it happens; it could not prevent one's pursuits from being completed in the past and could not transform into failures pursuits which have been forsaken before the time of one's death.

Nevertheless, death could also be bad for someone before it happens given different interpretations of desire satisfactionism

[8] As I noticed in the previous chapter, this view is most plausibly interpreted such that we do not take pursuing an outcome at some time to require putting in effort at that time to bring it about; see *First Excursus*.

and achievementism. Consider the interpretation of desire satisfactionism which states that one's desire for an object is satisfied if the object obtains *at any time* and frustrated if the object *never* obtains. Also consider the interpretation of achievementism which states that one achieves an end if one's efforts ensure it is realized *at any time* and fails to achieve it if that end is *never* realized. On these views, to contribute to one's well-being, the objects one desires and the ends one pursues need not obtain concurrently with one's desiring those objects and pursuing those ends, respectively. Given these views: Death could make one worse off before it happens by frustrating one's past desires and rendering vain one's past pursuits, if it ensures that the objects one has desired never obtain and the ends one has pursued are never realized. Death could also make one better off before it happens by satisfying one's past desires and making it true that past pursuits were successful, if it ensures that the objects one has desired obtain and the ends one has pursued are realized. What's more, these interpretations of desire satisfactionism and achievementism allow that an individual's death could satisfy or frustrate desires and render successful or unsuccessful pursuits which she has forsaken long before her death.

Views which allow so-called *retroactive* harms and benefits are sometimes thought to be problematic for relying on *backward causation;* if one's future death, or any other future event, frustrates one's past desires and renders past pursuits vain, does that not mean a future event has caused past events? Those who advocate the possibility of retroactive harms and benefits views reply by distinguishing *reasons* for states of affairs from *causes* of them. While one's death in the future might be the *reason* one's desires were frustrated or one's efforts were in vain, the response goes, one's death does not *cause* one's desires to have

been frustrated or one's pursuits to have been failures.[9] The distinction between reasons and causes is somewhat vague but is some version of this response adequate? Solving these sorts of debates requires wading into the murky waters of modern metaphysics—and is therefore a task I leave to others.

Nevertheless, views which allow for retroactive harms and benefits yield other objectionable results. As I argued in the previous chapter, it would be absurd to suppose that prudence requires one to harm oneself in the present because doing so benefits one in the past to a greater extent. It is just as absurd to suppose prudence requires one to refrain from benefiting oneself in the present because it harms one in the past to a greater extent.[10] David Velleman identifies two further absurd consequences of views like the versions of desire satisfactionism and achievementism at issue here. These require us to say, "of a person who dies in harness, that he fared progressively worse toward the end, simply because he was acquiring more and more ambitions that would go unfulfilled".[11] These views also require us to say, "of a person raised in adversity, that his youth was not so bad after all, simply because his youthful hopes were eventually fulfilled in later life".[12] As such, there is compelling reason to suppose, along with Epicurus, that no events, including death, are bad for someone before the events have happened.

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[9] George Pitcher gives this sort of response. He argues we should distinguish between an event *causing* some state of affairs and its *making it true* that the state of affairs obtains. Writing in 1984, he gives the following example to illustrate how something could be made true by future events without being caused by them: "If the world should be blasted to smithereens during the next presidency of Ronald Reagan's, he is the penultimate president of the United states" ("The Misfortunes of the Dead", repr. in *The Metaphysics of Death*, Fischer, John Martin (ed.) (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994) 168).

[10] See section *2.3.2.2* and *First excursus*.

[11] "Well-being and Time", 339–40.

[12] *Ibid.*, 340.

3.1.2 The timing problem and the value of non-existence

How is the time of death's badness affected by rejecting the assumption that one has a well-being level after ceasing to exist—even one of zero? If one's well-being level during times one no longer exists is undefined, death could still be bad for the one who dies according to the deprivation account. Death could still make one's *whole* life worse than it would have been by precluding one from a future which would have increased its total value. But one could *not* say that one's well-being level during times one no longer exists is lower than it would have been if one had not died. No well-being level at all is *not* lower than even a positive well-being level. So, death could not be bad for the one who dies from the time she ceases to exist and afterwards. Accordingly, if retroactive harms and benefits have been ruled out, so death could not be bad at any time before it occurs, death would be bad for the one who dies without being bad for her at any time. Given this combination of views, in other words, death is a *timeless* or *atemporal* evil.[13]

Ben Bradley argues against the view that one has no well-being level after death. He begins with the observation that, insofar as one cares about one's well-being, one should be indifferent between a future in which one dies instantly and a future in which one falls instantly and permanently into an unconscious state. If this is so, Bradley argues, then it is plausible to say one has the same well-being level in each of these futures. That in turn means one has a well-being level in a future in which one no longer exists, since one could only have the *same* well-being level

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[13] This is the view defended in Jens Johansson, "When do We Incur Mortal Harm?", *The Cambridge Companion to Life and Death*, Luper, Steven (ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014) 161–3.

if it made sense to ascribe a well-being level to one in the first place.[14]

In response, David Hershenov complains that the same reasoning suggests—absurdly, he thinks—that one has well-being level in worlds where one never comes into existence. This is because one should also be indifferent between different worlds in which one never comes into existence—at least, insofar as one is concerned about one's own well-being. The absurdity of this result, Hershenov argues, shows that Bradley is incorrect in assuming that the rationality of self-interested indifference between two scenarios entails that one has the same well-being level in each.[15] But Hershenov's remarks draw the debate far enough into the territory of obscure philosophical matters that it seems to me unclear that either judgement about his example is entitled to being called *common sense*. Speaking for myself, I simply have no intuition about whether one has a well-being level in worlds in which one never exists.

However, there are considerations which raise a similar concern about Bradley's argument. Consider that it might be plausible to say that when one falls into a *permanently* comatose state, one ceases to exist as a person in a prudentially relevant sense. This might be so given certain psychological interpretations of what it means to be a person. If that were the case, then Bradley's argument would invite the response that indifference between this fate and death is appropriate because one lacks a well-being level in *both* futures.

Steven Luper argues defends the view that the deceased have no well-being levels. According to him, this view is supported by a plausible requirement for one's having a well-being level; one has a well-being level at some time, he argues, only if one is capable of having one's well-being level rise or fall at that time—

[14] *Well-being and Death*, 108–9.

[15] David Hershenov, "A More Palatable Epicureanism", *American Philosophical Quarterly* 44/2 (2007) 174.

only if, as he puts it, one is *responsive* to harms and benefits at that time. According to Luper, this requirement explains why living, sentient being have well-being levels while shoes and other inanimate objects have no well-being level. In other words, it explains why, no matter how well one fares, it is dubious to say one is better off than a shoe.[16]

However, Bradley strikes back, arguing Luper's responsiveness requirement fails in the following thought experiment:[17] Suppose hedonism is true. Now imagine that Ms. Grey is someone born incapable of feeling pleasure or pain, who never gains this capacity, while Mr. Grey is someone capable of feeling pleasure and pain, who—due to his unusual circumstances—never does. Luper's responsiveness requirement implies that Ms. Grey is relevantly like a shoe, and thus has no well-being level, while Mr. Grey does have a well-being level throughout his life, though always one of zero. But, according to Bradley, it seems doubtful that the responsiveness requirement yields the correct result here.[18] The relevant difference between Ms. Grey and Mr. Grey, on the one hand, and inanimate objects, on the other, he suggests, does not have to do with their responsiveness. Instead, the relevant difference is that while there are at least some possible worlds in which Ms. and Mr. Grey have a positive or negative well-being level, there are no possible worlds in which inanimate objects do.

It is not clear what sort of unusual circumstances Bradley has in mind. It difficult to imagine exactly what usual circumstances would ensure that Mr. Grey never experiences pleasure or pain *while retaining the capacity* for experiencing pleasure and pain.

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[16] *The Philosophy of Death*, 132–5.

[17] *Well-being and Death*, 103–4.

[18] As Bradley notices: "The problem raised does not depend on the supposition that hedonism is true; the example is easily adaptable to other axiologies (imagine someone who cannot form desires, and someone who can but never does …)" (*ibid.*, 104).

If we imagine Mr. Grey as someone who has permanent anaesthesia, for example, then his case is not really different from Ms. Grey's. Perhaps, then, the coherence of Bradley's example deserves to be questioned. However, I do not intend to enter further into the debate about the value of non-existence than this. From the perspective of Epicurus' challenge, leaving the question of whether one's well-being level while deceased is zero or undefined might seem to leave those who think death is an evil of privation with a dilemma: Either death is bad for the one who dies at times after she has ceased to exist or death is bad for her without being bad at any time. However, counterintuitive as it might be to suppose either of these possibilities is true, I argue that we do not have reason to think either one is undeniably false or unacceptable. In fact, I argue that the consequences of denying that death is ever bad for the one who dies—of denying that comparativism can be applied to the event of a person's death—are far more unacceptable than supposing that death is an evil posthumously or timelessly.

3.2 Death—a timeless evil?

Accepting that death is a timeless evil requires rejecting Epicurus' contention that, for something to be bad for someone, it must be bad for her at some time. Call this the *temporal requirement*. Now, why should the temporal requirement *not* be rejected? I suspect that the temporal requirement appears indubitable at first glance only because of its ambiguity. As noticed earlier, the question posed by Epicurus' argument might be read in at least two different ways. One reading of the question is: At which times is it *true* that someone's death is bad for her? This corresponds with one way of reading the temporal requirement. According to this reading, for something to be bad for someone, it must be *true* at some time that it is bad for her. This seems hard to deny. However, the view that death is a timeless evil does

not violate this interpretation of the requirement. Recall Feldman's answer to this first reading of the question: If death is bad for someone, he says, it is true at all times that it is bad for her. This is because it is true at all times that the value of her whole life in the closest possible world in which she continues to live is greater. Feldman's answer to this question is plausible, and the view that death is a timeless evil is entirely compatible with it. In fact, it follows from the same view which supports Feldman's answer—the deprivation account of death's badness—combined with the view that the value of non-existence is undefined. Instead, the view that death is a timeless evil answers another reading of Epicurus' question: At which times is it true that someone's death is bad for her *at that time*? Corresponding to this reading of the question is a second way of reading the temporal requirement. On this reading of the requirement, for something to be bad for someone, it must be true at some time that it is bad for her *at that time*. The view that death is a timeless evil *is not* compatible with this requirement. According to this view, death is bad for the one who dies, because it makes her whole life worse off than it would have been, but not bad at any time, because there is no specific time at which she is worse off than she would have been.

Even so, it is far from obvious that the temporal requirement—on this second interpretation—is true; there is certainly nothing incoherent about arguing that, whereas some evils of privation can be located in time, the evil of death cannot be. However, there is something to worry about in regarding death as different from other evils of privation in this respect. The worry is that this account of the evil of death would entail an objectionable *lack of uniformity* with relevantly similar evils. As Jens Johannsson, an advocate of the timeless view, expresses the problem:

> When is it bad for me to miss my flight to Japan? To be drugged into unconsciousness? To have my home burgled? To lose my friends? In

> all these cases, the answer seems to be the same: the event harms me *after* it occurs. For that is when I would have received the benefits of which the event deprives me (the joys of Japan, for example). […] [S]ince overall harms other than my death harm me at times, then surely my death must do so as well. We should distrust any view that makes death the only exception to the rule, or one of a few exceptions. If nothing else, the idea that death is such a nonstandard harm provokes the Epicurean suspicion that it is not worth caring about.[19]

Johannsson's own response to this problem is to question the assumption that death is the only, or one of very few, timeless evils. He points out that, given the same combination of views which motivate the timeless view, any event which makes someone worse off than she would have been by shortening her life would be bad for her without being bad at any time.[20] That is to say, any event which is a condition of one's dying at some time will be timelessly bad, if one would have had been better off continuing to live. So, for example, if one would not have died at 10 o'clock if had one not woken up at 9 o'clock, then waking up at 9 o'clock would be—at least in this respect—timelessly bad for one. The badness of such events would be, of course, merely derivative of the badness of death.

Another way to challenge the assumption that death is the only, or one of very few, timeless evils is to appeal to narrativism about lifetime well-being.[21] According to this view, the value of one's whole life cannot be determined simply by adding together all the momentary goods in one's life and subtracting all the momentary evils. Put differently, on this view, the value of one's whole life is not merely the sum of one's well-being level at each moment within one's life. Instead, certain global properties of one's life help to determine its total value, such as its narratable features and the temporal ordering of periods of faring well and

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[19] "When do We Incur Mortal Harm?", 150, 161.

[20] *Ibid.*, 161–3.

[21] This view was introduced in section *2.3.3.1* in the previous chapter.

faring badly. The presence or absence of those global features will increase or decrease the value of one's whole life without affecting how well one fares at each moment. These narrative goods and evils thus also appear to be timeless.

However, narrativism is a highly controversial view. So, it seems unwise to rest one's response to the uniformity objection on it. Instead, the part of the objection worth challenging is the assumption that the lack of uniformity between death as a timeless evil and other timeful evils of privation gives credence to the Epicurean view. It is important to notice if comparativism is true, death will be overall bad for the same reason that anything which is overall bad is—that is, because it makes someone worse off than she would have been. To accept comparativism but deny that it can be applied to the event of death would involve an equally suspicious lack of uniformity as claiming that the evil of death is a *sui generis* timeless evil. As long as comparativism is accepted, therefore, the uniformity objection alone does not provide reason to accept the Epicurean view. Rather, it constitutes an argument for the view that, like other evils of privation, death is bad *after* it has happened, at those times one would have received the benefits which death precludes. If that requires that one has a well-being level while deceased, then the uniformity objection would also constitute an argument for accepting that one does.

I argue in the next section that Epicurus fails to show death cannot be bad for someone after it has happened. But what if I am wrong about this? If death could be bad for someone, if at all, only were it bad timelessly, then we would to have two options; either accept the curious lack of uniformity between the timelessness of the evil of death and the "timefulness" of other evils of privation or accept the Epicurean view that death is not a genuine evil. For this second option to be appealing, it must be the case that accepting that death is a *sui generis* evil is *more unpalatable* than accepting the Epicurean view. However, in the

final part of this chapter, I argue that it is the Epicurean view which has far more unpalatable consequences.

3.3 Death—a posthumous evil?

Epicurus argues death cannot be an evil posthumously—that is, at times after one has died—because that would violate a plausible requirement for anything's being an evil at some time; for something to be a bad for someone at some time, he assumes, she must exist at that time. This is sometimes called the *existence requirement*. The existence requirement is not obviously false—but it is not obviously true either. If views which allow retroactive harms and benefits are untenable, then the existence requirement would have to be rejected to allow that events *occurring after* someone's death could be bad for her. Otherwise, one would have to accept—to use Thomas Nagel's examples—that "a man is not injured if his wishes are ignored by the executor of his will, or if, after his death, the belief becomes current that all the literary works on which his fame rests were really written by his brother".[22] Of course, the view that events occurring after someone's death can be bad for her is controversial. But, even so, the point is that the existence requirement needs to be argued for and not baldly asserted. So, what reason is there to accept the existence requirement?

The existence requirement follows from another view which Epicurus advances while arguing for his views on death. He writes:

[22] "Death", 4. In fact, many of Epicurus' ancient critics provide *ad hominem* attacks against him because he left behind a will; see James Warren, *Facing Death*, 162–99. Yet it seems easy enough to justify Epicurus' will-writing by appealing other-regarding considerations.

> Become accustomed to the belief that death is nothing to us. For all good and evil consists in sensations, but death is the deprivation of sensation.[23]

Epicurus' remarks suggest the following principle; for something to be bad for someone at some time, it must either consist in an unpleasant experience for her or cause her to have unpleasant experiences at that time. Something like this is usually called the *experience requirement*. Given that one ceases to exist after death and that those who do not exist cannot have experiences, the experience requirement entails the existence requirement. Nagel, however, is equally unimpressed with the experience requirement; he regards as absurd its implication that "even if a man is betrayed by his friends, ridiculed behind his back, and despised by people who treat him politely to his face, none of it can be counted as a misfortune for him so long as he does not suffer as a result".[24]

One response on behalf of Epicurus is to seek an alternative principle which accounts for Nagel's counterexamples while supporting the existence requirement. Stephen Rosenbaum, for example, argues that whereas being betrayed, ridiculed, despised and deceived are things which *could* cause a living person to have unpleasant experiences, if she discovered this were happening, nothing could cause the dead to have unpleasant experiences.[25] Accordingly, the Epicurean might appeal to the following principle: For something to be bad for someone at some time, it must either consist in an unpleasant experience for her or *be able to* cause her to have unpleasant experiences at that time. Call this the *modified experience requirement*.

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[23] "Letter to Menoeceus", 30.
[24] "Death", 4.
[25] "Stephen Rosenbaum, "How to be Dead and Not Care", repr. in *Life, Death & Meaning: Key Philosophical Readings on the Big Questions*, Benatar, David (ed.) (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004) 179.

Some argue that there are similar counterexamples to the modified experience requirement too. Jeff McMahan describes an example in which someone's life work comes to ruin while she is away for a holiday on a remote island. Because of the island's inaccessibility, the individual could only receive the news a week after this has happened. However, she dies in an accident on the island—after her life's work has collapsed but before she could have learned about it.[26] John Martin Fischer suggests a variant of this example, in which someone dies from heart failure mere minutes after (and in a way completely unrelated to) the death of her daughter in another remote, inaccessible part of the world.[27] Many people think that the collapse of the first person's work and the death of the second person's daughter are bad for each of them, even though the circumstances ensure it is not possible for them to experience any pain or grief as a result. If these intuitions are correct, then the modified experience requirement would be false.

However, one might also return to Nagel's original examples with a keener eye on what accounts for the evil suffered in these cases. Justin Capes plausibly argues that if some condition is not part of what *makes* an event bad for a person, it is not reasonable to treat that condition as a requirement for the event's badness.[28]

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[26] Jeff McMahan, "Death and the Value of Life", repr. in *The Metaphysics of Death*, Fischer, John Martin (ed.) (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994) 235.
[27] John Martin Fischer, "Mortal Harm", *The Cambridge Companion to Life & Death* (Cambridge University Press, 2014) 137. Fischer provides an even more fanciful counterexample to the modified experience requirement. It involves adding a "counterfactual intervener" to Nagel's original betrayal case. The counterfactual intervener would prevent the betrayed person from ever finding out about her betrayers if any situation should arise where that could happen. If the betrayed is about to walk into a room where the betrayal is occurring, for instance, the counterfactual intervener would immediately ensure that she is instead guided into another room. According to Fischer, those betrayals would still be bad for the betrayed, despite the fact that the counterfactual intervener ensure she cannot find out about them; see "Mortal Harm", 138. But some might find that the fancifulness of the example detracts from the clarity of their intuitions about it.
[28] Justin Capes, "Death, Betrayal, and a Guardian Angel", *Philosophical Papers* 46/2 (2017) 205.

The trouble is that the tendency for *discovered* betrayals to cause suffering does not seem to be part of what makes it bad for someone to be *secretly* betrayed. As Nagel writes about the Epicurean view:

> Loss, betrayal, deception, and ridicule are on this view bad because people suffer when they learn of them. But it should be asked how our ideas of human value would have to be constituted to accommodate these cases directly instead. One advantage of such an account might be that it would enable us to explain why the discovery of these misfortunes causes suffering—in a way that makes it reasonable. For the natural view is that the discovery of betrayal makes us unhappy because it is bad to be betrayed—not that betrayal is bad because its discovery makes us unhappy.[29]

What *does* explain the evil of betrayal then? Stephen Heatherington argues that the evil of betrayal consists in a kind of dissonance between how the betrayed person perceives the world and the way the world really is.[30] Another view, proposed by Capes, is that the evil of betrayal consists in the damage done to one's important relationships: "[B]ecause some measure of loyalty is essential to genuine friendship", he writes, "[t]o the extent that a person betrays us, that person is not being a good friend, and someone who constantly betrays us is at best only pretending to be our friend."[31] On the other hand, Fischer seems to think our interest in not being betrayed or deceived is basic, not reducible to our interest in having accurate perceptions or good friendships.[32]

There are, of course, important disanalogies between the evil of death and the evils cited as counterexamples to the experience and modified experience requirements. For starters, none of the

[29] "Death", 5.

[30] Stephen Heatherington, "Deathly Harm", *American Philosophical Quarterly* 38/4 (2001) 351–2.

[31] "Death, Betrayal, and a Guardian Angel", 203.

[32] "Mortal Harm", 143–5.

latter—at least in the examples I have described—involve something being bad for someone during times she no longer exists. But this disanalogy is unavoidable in this context. The requirements being considered are meant to be principles which support the existence requirement. As such, it would be question begging to reject them using examples of evils which do not count as such according to the existence requirement. Rather, the point is merely to call into doubt the motivation for the existence requirement.

Another important disanalogy is that evils cited as counterexamples, such as betrayals, are supposed to be *intrinsically* bad for someone, whereas an individual's death--at least at times *after* it has occurred—is meant to be *extrinsically* bad for her.[33] More specifically, it meant to be bad in virtue of precluding further intrinsic goods. But noticing this distinction helps to clarify exactly what the Epicurean stance entails. To support Epicurus' argument, the existence requirement must be understood as identifying a necessary condition for something to be *either* intrinsically *or* extrinsically bad. Epicurus' aim is, after all, to show that death cannot be bad in any manner for someone after it happens.

Those who think death is simply an evil of privation can gladly accept the experience and modified experience requirements as applied to *intrinsic* evils. In other words, they can gladly accept that, for something to be intrinsically bad for someone at some time, it must either constitute an unpleasant experience for her, cause her an unpleasant experience or be able to cause her an unpleasant experience at that time. In fact, these requirements follow from hedonism, and two of the most prominent defenders of the view that death is simply an evil of privation,

[33] Though, of course, it would not be merely extrinsically bad given the annihilation account.

Bradley and Feldman, accept hedonism.[34] However, those who think death is an evil of privation cannot accept the experience and modified experience requirements as applied to *extrinsic* evils.

Applied to extrinsic evils, the experience requirement implies that events which merely preclude further intrinsic goods without causing pain are not genuine evils. This amounts to denying that anything can be extrinsically bad except by promoting further intrinsic evils. David Suits explicitly endorses something like this view. He draws a distinction between *intrinsic* evils, such as pain; *derivative* evils, which cause someone to suffer intrinsic evils; and *relational* evils, which preclude one from having intrinsic goods one would have otherwise had. According to Suits, relational evils are not genuine evils at all, unless they are also intrinsic or derivative evils.[35] It is worth noticing that Suits' stance implicitly involves rejecting comparativism, which allows that events which are merely relational evils can be overall bad for someone. Such events cannot be overall bad if they are not really bad at all.

Bradley offers a persuasive response to Suits' view. The point he makes is that, insofar as one cares about someone's well-being, one has reason to stop that person from being precluded from further intrinsic goods, if it is possible for one to do so.[36] Imagine, for example, that someone is presented with a drug which, unbeknown to her, will prevent her from experiencing pleasure for years, without causing anything good to happen to her. Surely, any witness who cares about her well-being and knows of the drug's effects has reason to stop her from taking it. To insist that taking the drug is not a genuine evil by appealing

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[34] Bradley, *Well-being and Death*, 4–46, and Feldman, *Confronting the Reaper*, 131ff.

[35] David Suits, "Why Death is not Bad for the One who Dies", repr. in *Life, Death & Meaning: Key Philosophical Readings on the Big Questions*, Benatar, David (ed.) (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield) 266–9.

[36] *Well-being and Death*, 70–2.

to a narrow account of this concept is, therefore, simply to divorce the concept from its usual normative significance. It is simply to allow that one has reason to prevent some events which are not genuine evils, narrowly construed, but are so according to comparativism. Bradley writes:

> This may be even clearer in the case of benefits. Suppose a vaccination prevents me from experiencing great pain, and causes nothing good to happen to me. A difference-making [i.e., comparative] view of benefit would entail, correctly, that the vaccination is beneficial for me. Surely it would be irrational for me not to care whether I receive the vaccination. But it is purely a *relational* benefit; it is not intrinsically good, nor is it derivatively good (in Suit's sense).[37]

It might be tempting for the Epicurean to reply by appealing to the modified experience requirement. Applied to extrinsic evils, the modified experience requirement implies that some events which merely preclude further intrinsic goods without causing pain *could* be genuine evils—but only as long as these *could* cause pain. But it does not seem that the possibility of being caused pain as a result of being deprived of some goods is what *makes* it bad to be so deprived. The person who is robbed of pleasurable experiences for years by a powerful drug still suffers a misfortune even if the circumstances ensure that she experience no pain as a result of the deprivation—even if, for example, the drug also disrupts her cognitive processes sufficiently to bar her from realizing what has happened to her and being troubled by the discovery. And again, because one surely has reason to avoid this fate, the Epicurean who insists that the concept of evil should be restricted in accordance with the modified experience requirement simply renders it a concept with diminished normative significance.

[37] *Well-being and Death*, 71.

The failure of the experience and modified experience requirements shows that the existence requirement is lacking in motivation. What's more, since the counterexamples to these rival views are easily accommodated by comparativism, our discussion helps to highlight the appeal of the latter view. At the same time, it does not show that the existence requirement must be abandoned. The Epicurean could agree that comparativism is plausible in general but argue that death is an exceptional case. She could argue that death is radically different from events which can be evils and benefits because it takes the subject of those evils and benefits out of existence. However, as I argue in the next section, there is reason to not to accept this or any other version of the Epicurus' view.

3.4 Prolonging and ending life

According to the deprivation account, death is bad for the one who dies in the sense of being *worse* than continuing to live. Death is also sometimes good for the one who dies in the sense of being *better* than continuing to live. Why should one *not* reject this view? To begin with, rejecting this view commits one to thinking there is *never* self-interested reason to prolong one's life rather than end it. It commits one to thinking there is *never* self-interested reason to end one's life rather than prolong it either. Plausibly, for there to be such reason to ensure some outcome rather than an alternative, there must be an advantage for doing so over ensuring the alternative, from the perspective of one's well-being. But for there to be a well-being-related advantage for ensuring some outcome rather than an alternative is just for it to be *better* for one to do so and *worse* for one not to do so, in terms of one's well-being. As such, if the Epicurean denies that dying at some time can be better or worse than continuing to live, she must accept that continuing to live cannot have any well-being-related advantages or disadvantages for the one

who dies, and thus that there is no self-interested reason either to prolong one's life or end it. James Warren writes:

> The Epicureans appear to offer no significant positive reason for wishing to continue to live, beyond mere inertia [...] This amounts to saying the Epicurean will simply continue to live with no sufficient reason either to kill himself or to want to survive until tomorrow.[38]

Admittedly, given the Epicurean view, one could still have *other-regarding* reasons to prolong or end one's life, even in the absence of *self-interested* reasons to do so; the harm one's death would do to those one leaves behind could be a reason to prolong one's life. However, it is far from clear that anyone should want to bite the bullet in accepting there are no reasons of the latter sort to prolong or end one's life. The absurdity of accepting such consequences is shown by appealing to some examples. Consider one which Fischer offers:

> [S]uppose one is standing on a railroad track and sees a train coming very fast; what reason does one have (according to the Epicurean) to step aside? Assuming that one could know that the train would kill one instantaneously (with no pain involved), why exactly should one step aside?[39]

I doubt anyone would accept that one has no reason to step aside and avoid the oncoming train, especially when doing so requires so little effort. Or, at the very least, I doubt anyone who would claim to accept this view would act upon it! Also consider the example provided by Samuel Scheffler:

> Imagine [...] a torture victim who is undergoing such horrible agonies at the hands of a sadistic Epicurean that he begs his tormenter to kill him. And imagine that the Epicurean torturer replies: "So death, the

[38] *Facing Death*, 210.
[39] John Martin Fischer, "Death", *The International Encyclopedia of Ethics*, LaFollette, Hugh (ed.) (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2013) 1230.

> thing you fervently desire, is nothing to you, since so long as you exist, death is not with you; but when death comes, then you will not exist. It does not then concern you either when you are living or when you are dead, since in the first case it is not, and in the second case you are no more." If the Epicurean torturer's response seems preposterous, then it is unclear why Epicurus's own response to those who fear death should be any less so.[40]

Indeed, if one denies that death can be good for the one who dies in the sense of being better than continuing to live, one must accept that one is never better off dying—no matter how miserable continued existence would be. Even someone sympathetic to the Epicurean view is likely to be put off by this implication. But it would be unacceptably arbitrary to allow that while dying *can* be better than continuing, dying *cannot* be worse than continuing to live. There is simply no reason to suppose that death's preclusion of further evils could be beneficial without its preclusion of further goods being harmful. As Warren puts the point, "[i]f death cannot be a relational harm, then life should not be able to be a relational benefit."[41]

The Epicurean might reply that a person's *desires* give her reason to prolong or end her life, even in the absence of the sort of comparative evaluation which supports the view that death is an evil. James Stacey Taylor, for example, argues that "[t]he fact that a person is suffering combined with her desire to end the suffering could give her a *non-comparative* reason to take action to end her suffering; a reason that exists independently of any alternative that she might consider".[42] Yet this seems to involve a confusion about what kinds of reasons are relevant here. Certainly, one's desires provide reasons for action in the sense of *motivating* action. One's desires, in other words, provide *psychological*

[40] *Death and the Afterlife*, 84.
[41] *Facing Death*, 201.
[42] James Stacey Taylor, *Death, Posthumous Harm and Bioethics* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2012) 108. Emphasis added.

reasons for performing certain actions. However, what is relevant here is whether there are *logical* reasons for prolonging or ending one's life related to one's own well-being. But again, in this sense, it is not clear that anything could count as a well-being-related reason for, say, ending one's life unless it also constitutes an advantage for dying over continuing to live. That is, unless it also constitutes a reason for regarding dying as better for one than continuing to live. Of course, facts about one's desires might provide such reason to favour some action over another. Yet this would be because the former promises to satisfy more or frustrate fewer of one's desires than the latter. This brings us right back to the comparative evaluations which motivate the anti-Epicurean view.

This argument against the Epicurean view is nothing like a definitive refutation of it. If Epicureans are imagined as *sceptics* about the view that death is an evil, it will certainly not appease their scepticism to offer this argument. A sceptic would ask how one *knows* there is sometimes self-interested reason to prolong one's life and sometimes reason to end it. Perhaps our intuitions about the kinds of examples given earlier are simply illusory. The argument given here does not show them to be indubitable. Nevertheless, the argument does tease out implications of the Epicurean view which the reader will probably find unacceptable. And, as David Benatar notices:

> There are not definitive, watertight arguments against committed sceptics about, for example, the existence of the external world or about causation. These sceptics raise interesting philosophical issues that are certainly worth thinking about and discussing, but that does not mean that we should believe and act as if there were no external world or no causation. Arguments that death is not bad seem to be of the same kind. They are fine for the seminar room, but one seems to have lost perspective if one genuinely accepts the conclusion.[43]

[43] *The Human Predicament*, 126.

Some contemporary philosophers who identify themselves as Epicureans accept that death could be *better* or *worse* for someone than continuing to live. This allows them to say there is self-interested reason to prolong one's life or end it. Instead, they take issue with how we *describe* events which are worse than the alternative but are not intrinsically bad.[44] Aaron Smuts argues our language should distinguish between what is *bad* for someone and what is *less good* for her. Smuts is willing to say only that death is *less good* for the one who dies than continued existence.[45] Similarly, David Hershenov argues the scope of the phrases *bad for* and *good for* should be restricted. He appeals to the view that one has no well-being level once one ceases to exist and suggests that something is only *bad for* or *good for* someone if it does not result in them immediately ceasing to have a well-being level. This allows Hershenov to say that continuing to live could be *good for* someone, even though dying at that time could not be *bad for* her.[46]

Views like Smuts' and Hershenov's are compatible with thinking that death could be better or worse than continued existence. They are also compatible with thinking that one has reason to put off death when one would be worse off dying and to end one's life when one would be better off dying. These views are not really in tension with the substance of the deprivation account of the evil of death. The disagreement here is purely *semantic*; it concerns merely what words should be used to describe the same set of evaluative claims about the same set of possibilities.[47] Perhaps Smuts and Hershenov's recommendations for how we should describe these have the advantage of

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[44] I set aside, for now, the view that it is intrinsically bad to be annihilated.
[45] Aaron Smuts, "Less Good but not Bad: In Defence of Epicureanism about Death", *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 93/2 (2012) 211–13.
[46] "A More Palatable Epicureanism", 176–7.
[47] Travis Timmerman gives a similar assessment; see his "A Dilemma for Epicureanism", *Philosophical Studies* 174/12 (2017) 10–6.

being in closer accord with common linguistic practise. Perhaps the same is true about similar prohibitions on using words like *evil*, *misfortune* or *harm* in talking about death. However, an important disadvantage of employing such narrow interpretations of these concepts is that it diminishes their normative significance. If death cannot be *bad* for someone, or an *evil*, a *misfortune* or *harm*, then that simply means we have well-being-related reasons to avoid something which cannot be any of these things. If these concepts are to retain their normative significance, they should be broadened in accordance with the comparativism.

Conclusion

The question of when death is bad for the one who dies is not easily answered. It is not plausible to say death is bad before it occurs or only at the time it occurs. But whether it is bad from the time it occurs and afterwards or bad without being bad at any specific time depends on the thorny issue of whether the deceased can be said to have a well-being level. The uniformity objection against the view that death is bad timelessly offers a consideration in favour of the view that death is bad posthumously. However, the plausibility of the view that death is an evil of privation does not depend on which of these two views about the time of the evil of death one accepts. Either view has counterintuitive implications, but denying that death is an evil of privation requires accepting the unacceptable.

4
Facing Death

> People say of death, "There's nothing to be frightened of." They say it quickly, casually. Now let's say it again, slowly, with re-emphasis. "There's NOTHING to be frightened of."
>
> Julian Barnes[1]

4.1 Rational attitudes concerning death

There are a variety of questions one might ask about the rationality of attitudes concerning death. One might ask whether people's attitudes about death are rational in the sense of being *responsive to reason*. Arguably, our fear of death is, as James Warren expresses the view, "an ineradicable part of human psychology which is not susceptible to rational inspection or alteration on the basis of rational argument".[2] One might also ask whether people's attitudes are rational in the sense of being *motivated by reasonable beliefs*. Samuel Scheffler argues there is some truth to the Epicurean hypothesis that fear of death is motivated by confused beliefs about being dead. "[M]ore people than might care to admit it are subject to something that might be described as a fear of the experience of being dead," he writes; "This fear reveals itself, perhaps, when people wish to be buried near their loved ones so that they won't be lonely in death, or

[1] *Nothing to be Frightened of*, 99.

[2] *Facing Death*, 8. To be sure, this is not Warren's own view.

when they prefer cheerful and picturesque settings for their burial plots rather than gloomy or depressing ones."[3] More generally, and without reference to people's actual attitudes, one might ask about what attitudes concerning death are *fitting* or *appropriate.* An attitude which is fitting or appropriate is one which there is, to that extent, reason for one to adopt. This chapter is concerned with the last of these questions.

In answering this question, it is helpful to distinguish between different *kinds* of attitudes one could have concerning one's death. A standard distinction is between "pro-" or positive attitudes, which involve regarding an object favourably, and "con-" or negative attitudes, which involve regarding an object unfavourably. Pro-attitudes include desiring, hoping, liking, loving, and so on, while con-attitudes include fearing, regretting, disliking, hating, and so on. Another useful distinction is between contrastive attitudes, like preferences, which involve regarding some object favourably or unfavourably *relative* to another, and non-contrastive attitudes, which involve regarding some object favourably or unfavourably *by itself*. With these distinctions in mind, a simple and plausible view seems to be that it is fitting to regard an object *favourably*, to the extent that it is good; *unfavourably*, to the extent that it is bad; and *favourably or unfavourably relative to another object*, to the extent that it is better or worse than the latter, respectively. Call this the *tripartite view of appropriateness*.

Importantly, accepting the tripartite view does not require accepting "fitting attitude" analyses of value.[4] According to such views, for something to be good is just, roughly, for it be a fitting object of pro-attitudes and for it to be bad is just for it to be a

[3] *Death and the Afterlife*, 101–2.
[4] In thinking about this account of value, I benefitted from the helpful introduction in Wlodek Rabinowicz, "Value, Fitting Attitude Account of", *The International Encyclopedia of Ethics*, LaFollette, Hugh (ed.) (Malden, MA: Blackwell) 5282–91.

fitting object of con-attitudes. What is distinctive about this approach is that it takes evaluative concepts to be reducible to action-guiding concepts. In other words, it explains what it means for an object to be valuable in terms of the attitudes one *has reason to* take regarding the object. In doing so, it inverts the explanatory priority to be found in the commonsense view according to which reasons for responding to things in certain ways are grounded in evaluative considerations about them. According to that view, if a person's death were a fitting object of negative attitudes, for example, this would be *because* it is bad for her. By contrast, according to fitting attitude analyses, if a person's death were bad for her, this would be *because* it is a fitting object of negative attitudes. Both of these views assume the tripartite view of appropriateness. Given fitting attitude analyses, the latter view is entailed by the necessary conceptual connection between being valuable and being a fitting object of certain attitudes. However, even if such analyses of the concept of value are untenable, this shared assumption remains plausible.

Given the tripartite view of appropriateness, it would seem strongly disapproving attitudes regarding one's death are typically appropriate, since the evil of death is often significant. There is, however, a complication here. Even if person's death might be bad for her, it could be an event which is good for others. The death of a martyr, for example, would fit this description. And perhaps a person's death might even be good despite being an evil for her and many others, perhaps good from the point of view of the universe; if it is ever true that someone deserves to die, then there could be the goodness of justice to take into consideration. But even if a person's death is good for others or good for the universe, so to speak, it would make sense to ask whether it is appropriate to regard her death unfavourably *for her own sake*—that is, taking into consideration only how it affects her. In other words, it makes sense to ask how

she should regard her death insofar as it affects her own well-being.

More broadly, one should notice that a disapproving attitude concerning death might be fitting without being *all-things-considered* rational. To begin with, there might be prudential reasons to temper even fittingly disapproving attitudes regarding one's death—to hold such attitudes with decreased intensity and frequency. In this respect, it is not surprising to find that Epicurus and Lucretius argue being troubled by our deaths is both inappropriate and imprudent; inappropriate, because death cannot be bad for the one who dies; and imprudent, because being troubled by death makes our lives go worse, not better.[5] Epicurus seems to be worried about the painful feelings which come along with negative attitudes about one's death. Think of how unpleasant it feels to be afraid, for example; it would certainly be better, all things being equal, not to experience this. But it is doubtful that this alone should be enough to make anything but equanimity before death irrational. Lucretius, by contrast, describes in much greater detail what he takes to be the disastrous consequences of fearing death. According to him, the fear of death leads to behaviour that is harmful not only to oneself but also to others. He writes:

> [A]varice and blind lust for status, which drive wretched people to encroach beyond the boundaries of right and sometimes, as accomplices and abettors of crime, to strive night and day with prodigious effort to scale the summit of wealth—*these sores of life are nourished in no small degree by dread of death.* [...] And often, in consequences of dread of death, people are affected by such intense loathing of

[5] Amélie Rorty gives the Epicurean view a bizarre twist. She argues that while death is not a fitting object of fear, because it cannot bad for the one who dies, fearing death is beneficial insofar as it promotes behaviour aimed to avoid mortal danger; see her "Fearing Death", *Philosophy* 58/224 (1983) 175–88. This view seems incoherent, however; if it cannot be to one's disadvantage to die, then it cannot be to one's advantage to have dispositions to avoid death.

> life and the sight of the light that with mournful hearts they sentence themselves to death, forgetting that the source of their sorrows is this very fear, which prompts one person to outrage decency, another to break bonds of friendship, and, in short, to overthrow all sense of natural duty[.][6]

On Lucretius' view, therefore, there are not only prudential reasons to temper one's dread of death but also moral reasons. But I leave further consideration of Lucretius' arguments to others. Replying to them adequately requires much more than armchair scholarship, and there are more than enough philosophical puzzles about the fear of death to fill this chapter.[7]

There are other ways in which it might not be all-things-considered rational to be anxious about one's own death. There is a certain line of reasoning familiar from moral philosophy which suggests that, from an impartial perspective, there is nothing which justifies being more concerned about one's own misfortunes than comparable misfortunes suffered by others. This seems to pose a challenge to the rationality of being *especially* distressed about one's own death. After all, most of the millions

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[6] Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, Smith, Martin (tr.) (Indiana, IN: Hackett Publishing, 2001) 69–70 [3.59–4, 79–84]. Emphasis added.

[7] To Lucretius' credit, some psychological research suggests that anxiety about death tends to support a number of destructive behaviours. In the wake of Ernest Becker's canonical but somewhat misleadingly-titled *The Denial of Death* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1973), research psychologists have attempted to corroborate the central idea of this text; that humans are motivated to cultivate a sense of themselves as valuable contributors to a meaningful social world in order to safeguard against the psychological distress that accompanies awareness of mortality. In the last few decades, some studies have turned up some rather undesirable behavioural effects of anxiety about death. For example, following reminders of our mortality, it is more probable that we will harm people who are culturally dissimilar to ourselves; be more supportive of war against culturally different nations; believe stereotypes about other groups of people; be more supportive of the killing of non-human animals; and be repulsed by and dissociate from our animal nature in ways that threaten our health. For an introduction and overview of this research, see Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg & Tom Pyszczynski, *The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life*.

of deaths which occur every year are probably equally fitting objects of negative attitudes as one's own eventual death. But this challenge to the rationality of our attitudes is itself easily challenged. The view that rationality requires complete impartiality has unpalatable implications. It implies, for instance, that it would be all-things-considered irrational to be *especially* concerned with misfortunes befalling one's loved ones. Answering the challenge fully, however, requires specifying what considerations make it rational to be more troubled by some misfortunes than others of similar magnitude. The upshot of this is that a complete account of the rationality of regarding death unfavourably could be, as Ben Bradley suggests, "messy and unsystematic, involving facts about spatiotemporal proximity and personal relationships, among other things".[8] The mammoth theoretical task of describing that complete account is also one which I leave to others.

Instead the focus of this chapter is on some problems which are meant to arise for combining the deprivation account of death's badness with the tripartite view of appropriateness. There is, firstly, an important challenge to the rationality of our attitudes concerning death which arises from an often-overlooked feature of the deprivation account. Following Bradley, I call this the *multiplicity-of-comparisons problem*. I try to show that thinking about this problem clarifies what sorts of attitudes could be appropriate regarding one's death; in particular, it also clarifies what must be true about the badness of death for it to warrant non-contrastive negative attitudes. Another problem concerns cases in which it is irrational to be troubled by something which counts as bad for one given comparativism. But I argue that none of these cases force us to abandon the tripartite

[8] *Well-being and Death*, 61–2. For further discussion of whether it is rational to be especially concerned with one's own deaths, see Jens Johansson, *Mortal Beings: On the Nature and Value of Death* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2005).

view of appropriateness—and, therefore, that these cases do not threaten plausible grounds for thinking that disapproving attitudes regarding death are appropriate.

However, it is a further question which *particular* attitudes concerning death might be appropriate. For the most part, I leave this further question aside too. The literature on this question, small as it might be, is often frustrating, and usually for the same reason; the disagreement too frequently seems merely to concern the label that should be applied to attitudes seem appropriate and which we otherwise have no trouble in identifying. Some argue, for example, that *fear* is not a fitting response to one's death because fear is based on uncertainty about whether its object obtains.[9] In reply, Scheffler appeals to a distinction between being afraid *that* something is the case and being afraid *of* something. He argues that while it would be inappropriate for a mortal being to be afraid *that* she will die, it is not clearly inappropriate to be afraid *of* death.[10] But even if Scheffler's distinction is untenable, there clearly is a way of anticipating events which are *certain* to happen with disapproving attitudes. What is not clear is whether it matters what label one applies to those attitudes. As David Benatar writes:

> The point is that it is appropriate to have some serious negative attitude in response to something that is seriously bad. If one's semantic quibbles exclude all the standard words we would use to describe the sort of attitudinal response that is reasonable, then one should suspect that the pedantry is inspired by unbridled optimism. If we have no word that the optimistic pedant thinks appropriate, we should just invent one. The crucial question is not a linguistic one, but rather whether it is reasonable to have a negative attitude to

[9] For example, O. H. Green, "Fear of Death", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 43/1 (1982) 103; and Shelly Kagan, *Death* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012) 292.
[10] *Death and the Afterlife*, 104–6.

something bad. Self-imposed linguistic limits should not stand in the way.[11]

Of course, there is a *distinctly intense* attitude associated with the anticipating one's eventual death. One might want to call it terror, angst, despair or something else, but with whatever label, it is easy enough to identify in experience. Todd May, for example, reports: "When I taught [my] seminar on death I often woke up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat, thinking about the end of my existence."[12] In the same vein, Julian Barnes writes:

> [My friend] consolingly quotes a study showing that fear of death drops off after the age of sixty. Well, I have gotten there before him, and can report that I am still waiting for the benefit. Only a couple of nights ago there came again that alarmed and alarming moment, of being pitchforked back into consciousness, awake, alone, utterly alone, beating pillow with fist and shouting "Oh no Oh No OH NO" in an endless wail, the horror of the moment—the minutes—overwhelming what might, to an objective witness, appear a shocking display of exhibitionist self-pity.[13]

One of the arguments of this chapter is that the appropriateness of our ordinary ways of anticipating death, especially with the intense dread which May and Barnes describe, is best explained by supplementing the deprivation account with the annihilation account.

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[11] *The Human Predicament*, 137. In a similar vein, Bradley writes, "Some might think that some negative attitude towards death is rational, but that fear in particular might not be. […] I am not gripped by this problem. If it turns out that, say, dread is warranted but fearing isn't, is this important? I find it difficult to distinguish these emotions from each other anyway, so I just can't get too excited about which one is appropriate" ("How Should We Feel about Death?", *Philosophical Papers* 44/1 (2015) 4).

[12] *Death*, 22.

[13] *Nothing to be Frightened of*, 126.

4.2 The multiplicity-of-comparisons problem

Recall that if the deprivation account presents a complete explanation of death's badness, then death cannot be *intrinsically* bad for the one who dies but *extrinsically* bad—and, more specifically, it would be bad simply in virtue of precluding the attainment of further intrinsic goods. Put another way, a person's death would only bad for her in a comparative sense; that is, bad in the sense of being *worse than* the closest alternative where it does not occur. However, what counts as the closest possible world in which some event does not occur is not a determinate matter. As David Lewis emphasizes, counterfactuals are vague and different ways of resolving their vagueness are appropriate in different conversational contexts.[14] In thinking about what would have happened if some event had not occurred, the conversational context helps to determine which properties of the actual world must be held fixed in determining which is the most similar possible world in which the event does not occur. It does this by clarifying exactly what aspects of the event are salient.

Ben Bradley offers an example which helpfully illustrate this.[15] Imagine someone who dies because of severe injuries sustained in a traffic accident. What would have happened if this person had not died when she did? In some conversational contexts, such as ones in which the *timing* of this person's death is emphasized, we might plausibly say that if she had not died, she would have suffered terribly from her injuries for the rest of her life. Or, if the *exact timing* of her death is emphasized, we might

[14] See David Lewis, *Counterfactuals* (New York, NY: Basil Blackwell, 1973) *passim*.
[15] "How Should We Feel about Death?", 4. Some of my comments about this example are drawn from other remarks Bradley offers in his *Well-being and Death*, 49–50.

plausibly say that if she had not died then, she would have succumbed to same injuries mere moments later. And in other contexts, such as ones in which the *cause* of her death is emphasized, we might plausibly say that if she had not died, she would have lived a long, injury-free life.[16] It is, however, not arbitrary which of these counterfactuals is true. That is *not* determined by a choice to regard one among the multiplicity of comparisons as special. Rather, which of these counterfactuals is true is determined by how the context resolves the vagueness of the question, "What would have happened if this person had not died when she did?".[17]

The surprising consequence of all this is that if death is bad in virtue of making one worse off than one otherwise would have been, there is no unequivocal answer concerning whether and to what extent death is overall bad for the one who dies, unless the vagueness of the question about what would have happened is resolved in a specific manner.[18] Nevertheless, one can safely make claims about a death's being good, bad or neutral *relative to* a specific alternative, even though that specific alternative will not be relevant in all contexts. For example, regardless of the

[16] Such contexts, David Lewis emphasizes, are relatively atypical, since they allow for certain "back-tracking" counterfactual claims to be true, such as—in this case—the claim that if this person had not died at the time she did, she would not have been in a traffic accident right before; see his "Counterfactual Dependence and Time's Arrow", *Philosophical Papers, Volume II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986) 32–4.

[17] Fred Feldman puts forward a similar idea, arguing that a person's death might instantiate a variety of states of affairs—each of which should be evaluated separately, with different comparisons being relevant; see *Confrontations with the Reaper*, 224–6. In reply, McMahan complains that "[t]here seems to be no principled reason why [a person's] death should be compared with the closest alternative in which the victim does not die young rather than, for example, the closest alternative in which he does not die prematurely, or in which he does not die before reaching old age, […] or in which he does not die at all" (*The Ethics of Killing*, 120). But this is consistent with what is said above; that there is no single comparison which is special in all contexts, but that what comparison is relevant depends on which aspects of the event under consideration are salient.

[18] Bradley, "How Should We Feel about Death", 4–6.

conversational context in which Bradley's example is being considered, one could truly say that dying *rather than* surviving with no injuries is bad for the individual, just as dying *rather than* surviving with severe injuries might be good for her.

As such, noticing the multiplicity of comparisons does not threaten the appropriateness of contrastive attitudes concerning one's death. There does not seem to be anything problematic about the appropriateness of preferring to live without injuries *rather than* die in the traffic accident and of preferring to die in the accident *rather than* live with injuries. As Bradley notices, however, the problem is that if there is no unequivocal answer concerning whether and to what extent death is *overall* bad for the one who dies, then there is no unequivocal answer concerning what attitudes *towards* one's death are all-things-considered fitting.[19] In other words, there will not be a determinate answer concerning whether and to what extent one's death merits noncontrastive negative or positive attitudes overall.

Even so, we might distinguish—as Bradley does—between the appropriateness of one's attitude towards some event *overall*—taking everything into consideration—and of one's attitude toward the event *considered by itself*—that is, independently of what it produces or precludes.[20] The distinction is important because the multiplicity-of-comparisons problem concerns only one's overall attitudes towards one's death and not one's attitudes towards it considered by itself.

To see this, it is helpful to consider an example which Kai Draper presents as a problem for combining the deprivation account with the view that something is a fitting object of negative attitudes insofar as it is bad. Draper argues that the combination of these views absurdly implies that it is overall fitting to be distressed by having had a wonderful massage by a talented

[19] "How Should We Feel about Death?", 6.

[20] *Ibid.*, 3.

masseuse, if one otherwise would had had an even more wonderful massage by another, even more talented masseuse.[21] But, in thinking about this example, it is important to emphasize that it would be appropriate to have a positive attitude toward the massage considered by itself, insofar as the pleasure of the massage is intrinsically valuable. One should also notice that Draper's claim about what would have happened if one had not had the wonderful massage turns out false given certain ways of resolving the vagueness of the counterfactual. For example, if one emphasizes the approximate timing of the massage rather than who is giving it as a salient feature of the event, it may be true to say that if one had not had the wonderful massage, one would have had no massage that day at all. But, regardless of how this vagueness is resolved, it would be true to say both that having the wonderful massage is worse than having a more wonderful massage and that having the wonderful massage is better than having no massage at all. As such, in addition to having a positive attitude toward the massage, considered by itself, it would seem fitting for one to regret having had a wonderful massage rather than an even more wonderful massage but also to be glad that one had a wonderful massage rather than no massage at all.

These observations also help to answer on objection offered by Travis Timmerman to the view that something is a fitting object of negative attitudes insofar as it is bad.[22] He asks us to imagine someone who has been diagnosed with a terminal disease and knows she will die within a month. In an attempt to make her death less bad for her, she hires an assassin to kill her within a month's time on condition that she does not die before

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[21] Kai Draper, "Epicurus on the Value of Death", 78; "Death and Rational Emotion", *The Oxford Handbook of the Philosophy of Death*, Bradley, Ben, Feldman, Fred & Jens Johansson (eds.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 299.

[22] Travis Timmerman, "Your Death might be the Worst Thing Ever to Happen to You (But Maybe You Shouldn't Care", *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 46/1 (2016) 20–1.

the end of that period, so that there will be less she is prevented from having by dying of the disease. The trouble is—or so Timmerman argues—that it is just as fitting for this person to regard her death unfavourably before hiring the assassin as it is for her to regard it so after hiring the assassin, despite the fact that her death is now much less of a misfortune for her.

But is this true? On the one hand, if we are talking about the attitudes she adopts towards her death, *considered by itself*, then yes. On the other hand, if we are talking about the attitudes she adopts towards her death, *taking everything into consideration*, then surely not. After all, the considerations relevant to their appropriateness have changed. Timmerman claims the deprivation account implies this person's death is not as bad after she hires the assassin, because this ensures she would not have gained much had she not died—but again, this depends on how the vagueness concerning the question of what would have happened if she had not died is resolved. While it might not be bad for her to die of the disease *rather than* be killed by the assassin, it could still be bad for her to die of the disease *rather than* survive the disease *and* call off her assassination. As such, it would seem appropriate to prefer surviving without assassination to dying of the disease.

If the multiplicity-of-comparisons problem does not threaten the appropriateness of negative attitudes *towards* one's death considered by itself, then one potential response to the problem would be to argue that death is not always bad *merely* in a comparative sense. Consider, if there were nothing which is non-comparatively bad about death—as Bradley argues—then it would seem appropriate to be indifferent towards death, considered by itself.[23] By contrast, if death were non-comparatively bad, at least in some respect, then it may nonetheless be fitting for one to have a negative attitude towards one's death, considered by itself, even if it is not clearly fitting to hold an overall negative

[23] "How Should We Feel about Death", 6.

attitude toward one's death, taking everything into consideration.

4.3 The evil of death redux

Death might be responsible for some non-comparative evils if Bernard Williams were correct in saying that death is bad insofar as it frustrates one's desires. Similarly, if Martha Nussbaum were correct in saying that death is bad insofar as it renders one's pursuits empty or vain. Or, rather, only if these philosopher's claims are plausibly understood as identifying conditions which are non-comparatively bad. However, as I tried to show in the second chapter, for each of these views, the devil lies in the detail; ultimately, it is not clear that frustration and failure play a significant role in the evil of death or, indeed, any role at all.[24] What about Frances Kamm's view that death sometimes involves—in addition to the misfortune of being deprived of further goods in one's life—the misfortune of being parted from the goods already present in one's life? If the badness of *losing* something valuable is distinct from the badness of being *precluded from having it for longer*, then losing something rather than merely lacking it might be bad in a non-comparative sense. Yet the trouble is that Kamm's view is undermotivated; she does not provide compelling reasons to believe it is a greater misfortune to suffer the loss of something good than to merely lack it—or so I argued in the second chapter.[25]

Finally, there is Benatar's view that *annihilation* is bad for the person who dies, even if the *contents* of her continued existence would have been neutral on balance.[26] Earlier, however, it was emphasized that there are two ways of interpreting this view—and it can be added that only one of these interpretations would

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[24] See section *2.4.2.2* and *First excursus.*
[25] See *Second excursus.*
[26] I introduced this view in section *2.3.*

contribute to answering the present challenge. According to the first interpretation, *à la* Frances Kamm—which I referred to as the annihilation account—by annihilating the one who dies, death thwarts an interest one has in continued exist that is distinct from one's interest in receiving future goods. An alternative interpretation *à la* Thomas Nagel—which I referred to as the valuable container theory[27]—posits that continued existence as a person is itself to be counted among those future goods, such that by annihilating the one who dies, death thwarts an interest in continued existence which *is not* distinct from one's interest in receiving future goods.

If the annihilation account were false and the valuable container theory true, being taken out of existence would be bad in a comparative sense—that is, bad *relative* to continued existence. But if the annihilation account were true, being taken out of existence would be bad in a non-comparative sense. As such, if the annihilation account, rather than the valuable container theory, constitutes a plausible view, there would be grounds for having negative attitudes towards one's death, considered by itself, even though there is some indeterminacy concerning whether one's death is overall bad.

Some philosophers argue against the claim that annihilation itself is bad for the one who is annihilated. They typically do so based on the observation that being annihilated in no worse a fate, in itself, than entering a permanent state of unconsciousness.[28] However, as Benatar emphasizes, it is important to understand the claim that annihilation is bad to mean that the cessation of one's existence *in the prudentially relevant sense* is bad. "To say that the annihilation of the self or the ego is bad for

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[27] Following Kagan, *Death*, 259.

[28] For example, Kai Draper, "Death and Rational Emotion", 304; "Epicurean Equanimity towards Death", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 69/1 (2004) 114; and Steven Luper, "Review of Bernard Schumacher's *Death and Mortality in Contemporary Philosophy*".

the being that dies," he explains, "is entirely compatible with the view that what counts (prudentially) is not personal identity (in the strict, numerical sense of 'identity'), but rather psychological continuity or connectedness."[29] As such, it does not constitute an argument against the annihilation account to observe that being annihilated is no worse than entering a state of permanent unconsciousness, because—as Benatar puts it—"being reduced to such a state seems indistinguishable from death from a prudential perspective".[30]

Yet, for similar reasons, we might be suspicious of certain arguments in favour of thinking annihilation itself merits negative attitudes. Take David Belgin's argument that it is appropriate to be afraid of death because it is appropriate to be afraid of the very advanced stages of Alzheimer's diseases. According to Belgin, what justifies fearing those advanced stages of Alzheimer's diseases is that they involve losing one's ability to live as the person one was, but death, like advanced Alzheimer's disease, involves a similar loss.[31] The trouble is, if advanced Alzheimer's disease brings about the annihilation of the person one was in the prudentially relevant sense, then it would be question begging to support the conclusion that death is a fitting object of fear with the premise that advanced Alzheimer's disease is a fitting object of fear.

There is a similar impasse for another manner of defending the annihilation account which emerges in the context of my own investigation. One might attempt to defend the claim that annihilation itself is bad by appealing to its implications regarding the rationality of certain ways of responding to death. For example, if it is assumed that our ordinary ways of anticipating our

[29] *The Human Predicament*, 105.
[30] *Ibid.*, 130.
[31] David Belgin, "Fearing Death as Fearing the Loss of One's Life Lessons from Alzheimer's Disease", *Immortality and the Philosophy of Death* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 101–14.

eventual deaths with disapproval are appropriate, then the annihilation account might seem more plausible insofar as it explains how this might be, despite the multiplicity-of-comparisons problem. In particular, the annihilation account explains the appropriateness of what Scheffler describes as

> a distinctive kind of terror that is produced by the strange and *sui generis* character of the thought that I myself—the thinker of my thoughts, the perceiver of what I perceive—will simply stop being.[32]

This is what Nagel refers to as "the expectation of nothingness":

> an unmistakable experience, always startling, often frightening, and very different from the familiar recognition that your life will go on for only a limited time.[33]

In short, the annihilation account explains not only why it would be fitting to hold a negative attitude towards one's death, considered by itself, but also why it would be fitting to hold such an *intense* negative attitude towards it as terror, if we suppose that the badness of annihilation is not negligible but significant.[34]

However, the impasse which emerges in the context of my own investigation concerning these sorts of defences of the annihilation account is due to the fact that my goal is to *determine* which attitudes concerning death are rational. To assume the appropriateness of being terrified by death is, therefore, to beg the question with respect to the Epicurean views I seek to reject; it would be viciously circular to assume that death is rightly terrifying in order to challenge the view that anything but equanimity before death is irrational. Though, the same would be true in the

[32] *Death and the Afterlife*, 85–6.
[33] Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986) 225–6.
[34] Though not so significant as to imply that one is always all-things-considered better off continuing to live.

context of my project regarding attempts to reject the annihilation account by appealing to the appropriateness of indifference towards death!

I am sympathetic to the annihilation account and its implications concerning the rationality of terror of death. However, I do not see an unproblematic path to overcome this impasse here. In determining whether either the annihilation account or the valuable container theory is true, one might appeal to intuitions about what things are intrinsically good and bad. But there is bound to be just as profound disagreement concerning the intuition that annihilation is intrinsically bad and the intuition that existing as a person is intrinsically good. Thus, further argumentation would be required to resolve such disagreements. An alternative approach to establishing whether annihilation itself is bad for the one who dies would be to appeal to certain intuitions about when and to what extent death is bad for the one who dies. For example, if the deprivation account represents the full story about what makes death bad, then it is typically not very bad for one to die in old age, since one would not have gained much had one not died. If the annihilation account is true, however, then there is still something significantly bad about dying in old age, even when it is not all-things-considered bad[35] The annihilation account also explains why it might sometimes be rational for someone *not* to seek to end her life even when her expected quality of life is very poor, given that it implies there is *pro tanto* reason to avoid ending of one's life even when the goods of continued existence are matched by the evils. But intuitions about when and to what extent death is bad in these sorts

[35] Benatar, *The Human Predicament*, 134.

of cases are bound to be as controversial as the annihilation account itself.[36] Perhaps there are further—and different kinds of—considerations in favour of this view or against it, but I find myself at a dead end here.

4.4 The symmetry problem

A further problem remains for the appropriateness of disapproving attitudes concerning death as an evil of privation. There are cases in which it seems irrational to be troubled by certain evils of privation. Lucretius' famous description of our non-existence before conception as the mirror-image of our non-existence after death has been thought to pose a special problem of this sort.[37] The challenge arises from the apparent symmetry between the beginning and the ending of one's existence. Both one's conception and one's death are events which limit the duration of one's existence and so, it might be thought, both the "lateness" of one's conception and the "earliness" of one's death might preclude one from having more of a good life. Yet, while it does seem rational to regret not dying later, it seems irrational to wish

[36] On the rationality of ending one's life, for instance, Niko Kolodny writes: "If the evils in prospect outweigh the goods, then that, to my mind, settles the question. It is not as though the 'bad of extinction' puts a finger on the scales in favor of continued life that some further deficit in the goods of continued life must outweigh" ("That I Should Die and Others Live", *Death and the Afterlife*, Kolodny, Niko (ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 160). Samuel Scheffler disagrees, insisting that it would *not* be irrational were "someone for whom the evils of future life outweigh the goods […] [to] find the fact that death involved personal extinction to be a consideration in favor of avoiding it, albeit a consideration that might be outweighed" (*Death and the Afterlife*, 198.)

[37] See the passage quoted from Lucretius' *On the Nature of Things* in the introductory chapter.

one had come into existence earlier. What accounts for this asymmetry regarding the rationality of these attitudes?[38]

4.4.1 The impossibility solution

An important response to the symmetry problem involves arguing that the timing of one's conception cannot deprive one of anything because it is impossible for someone to come into existence significantly earlier than she did. The idea is that the approximate timing of one's conception is essential to one's identity—again, at least in the prudentially relevant sense. If this were true, anyone conceived substantial earlier than one was would have been someone else. As Thomas Nagel puts it, "[d]istinct possible lives of a single person can diverge from a common beginning, but they cannot converge to a common conclusion from diverse beginnings."[39]

More than one view has been called upon to establish this conclusion. According to one plausible view, one could not have been formed by anything other than the particular gametes that produced the zygote from which one developed. If this is correct, then one's genetic origins are essential to one's coming into existence.[40] As a result, anyone conceived much earlier would have been, in a sense, one's sibling—that is, unless one is in the *very*

[38] Some take the symmetry problem to concern our attitudes towards our death and conception. But depending on what counterfactuals are picked out by the conversational context, the closest possible world in which the specific event of a person's conception does not occur might be, for instance, one in which she never comes into existence. The symmetry problem is clearly not meant to be raising an issue concerning the rationality of wishing that one had never come into existence. It is also worth noting: I have suggested that annihilation, considered by itself, merits negative attitudes. However, there is nothing incoherent about accepting this while denying that coming into existence merits negative attitudes. This is simply because the "transition" *from* non-existence is not the same thing as the "transition" *to* non-existence.

[39] "Death", 8.

[40] A view famously defended by Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980) 112–4.

special circumstances of having been conceived through in vitro fertilization from a sperm and egg which were frozen for a significant period of time!

In reply, Frederik Kaufman argues that there are further necessary conditions for one's coming into existence. He complains that the genetic view merely describes what is essential to being the person one is on a "thin" interpretation of what it means to be a particular person. What is important in this context, he argues, is what is essential to being the person one is on a "thick" interpretation of what it means to be a particular person, which must necessarily revolve around the psychological properties one has, including one's memories, beliefs, desires, dispositions and so on.[41]

Kaufman's view is meant to lend further support the claim that one could not have come into existence much earlier than one did. If psychological personhood is what is important in determining under what conditions one could have come into existence, it would seem some of the details of a person's biography are essential to her having become the she is too. But, then, if one had been born substantially earlier, someone with very different experiences, and so with very different memories, beliefs, desires, dispositions and so on, would have come into existence.

However, critics of the impossibility solution argue that it fails regardless of whether the genetic view is supplemented by

[41] Frederik Kaufman, "Pre-Vital and Post-Mortem Non-Existence", repr. in *Life, Death & Meaning: Key Philosophical Readings on the Big Questions* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004) 254–6.

the psychological view.[42] The objection is that, given either view about what is essential to coming into existence, it remains possible for one to have been deprived of more of a good life through the lateness of one's conception. One might coherently imagine, to begin with, that the particular gametes from which one was produced were combined to form a zygote at a significantly earlier time, though this would seem to involve some kind of miracle—that is, some divergence from the laws governing the actual world. This could be something which would extend the duration of one's life if—as Christopher Belshaw has us imagine—some asteroid coming from space were going to collide with the earth next year, destroying all life on the planet.[43]

Some ways of imagining that the gametes from which one was produced were combined earlier might involve thinking of a possible world in which one becomes a very different person in the psychological sense. But not all ways of imagining this obviously do so. Travis Timmerman suggests, for example, that we imagine

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[42] There is much more to be said about these views. The genetic view has received some criticism from metaphysicians, but few writing about the symmetry problem call it into question. By contrast, Kaufman's view has been the subject of controversy. Jeff McMahan, for example, argues that we ought not hold fixed facts about a person's psychology when asking what is possible for her to have done. He argues that since one is identical to one's earlier self, and it was possible for one's earlier self to have become someone psychologically very different, it follows that one could have been psychologically very different. He concludes; "even if psychological continuity is the criterion of identity over time, it is not the criterion of the identity of persons across different possible lives" ("The Lucretian Argument", *The Good, the Right, Life and Death: Essays in Honour of Fred Feldman*, Jeff McDaniel, Kris, Raibley, Jason, Feldman, Richard & Michael Zimmerman (eds.) (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006) 215). The debate could be carried further, but I tend to agree with James Warren's assessment that one eventually arrives at a point in such debates about transworld identification where interlocutors find themselves in a stalemate based on irreconcilably conflicting intuitions about what counts as the same person in various counterfactuals; see his ""The Symmetry Problem", *The Cambridge Companion to Life & Death*, Luper, Steven (ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) 177.

[43] See Christopher Belshaw, "Later Death/Earlier Birth", *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 24/1 (2000) 74–8.

a world in which the causal chain of events between the start of the universe at the Big Bang and the formation of the Milky Way is altered, so that our galaxy comes into existence earlier, but includes the same sequence of events from its formation onwards as in the actual world.[44] In this possible world, one would still have the same memories, beliefs, desires, dispositions and so on. But, Timmerman argues, one might be deprived of further goods in this possible world if, for instance, the asteroid coming to destroy the earth next year were coming from somewhere outside the Milky Way.[45] The thought experiments is fantastical, certainly, seeing that there is no reason to believe we will soon all be destroyed in a cataclysmic collision of bodies in space. But the point is merely that it is not, strictly speaking, *impossible* to have been conceived significantly earlier or to have been deprived of goods through the lateness of one's conception.

4.4.2 Epistemic asymmetry

It is difficult to explain why regretting the lateness of one's conception should *necessarily* be irrational, as proponents of the impossibility solution aim to do. Perhaps there is some clever way to defend the impossibility solution against its critics, which further reflection could reveal. However, it does not seem to me that one needs to do so to answer the symmetry problem. The problem, as I understand it, is rather to explain why we *sometimes* have reason to regret the earliness of our death even though we *never*—or, at least, *hardly ever*—have reason to regret the lateness of our conception. After all, the symmetry problem is meant to be a challenge to commonsense views about the rationality of regretting the lateness of one's conception; and though it seems to be commonsensical to say one never has reason to regret the lateness of one's conception, I doubt

[44] Travis Timmerman, "Avoiding the Symmetry Problem", *Ratio* 38/4 (2017) 5–6.
[45] "Avoiding the Symmetry Problem", 7–8.

commonsense tells us there are *no* conceivable circumstances under which one could have such reasons.

Before elaborating further on how we should approach this way of understanding the problem, it is helpful at this point to notice an ambiguity regarding talk about rational attitudes. So far in this chapter, I have been concerned with what attitudes concerning death are rational *simpliciter* or rational in an unqualified sense. But one might also ask what attitudes are rational *relative to the epistemic standpoint of the agent*—that is, rational given the information available to the agent. One way of explaining how these senses of rationality relate would be to say that what is rational in the unqualified sense is rational relative to the epistemic standpoint of an omniscient agent. These two senses of rationality come apart: It would *not* be rational in the unqualified sense for someone to prefer, say, being immortal if she were better off mortal, even if she had reason to believe immortality would be better. By contrast, insofar as she has reason to believe immortality would be better, it would be rational in the agent-relative sense to prefer it. Indeed, in that case, it would *not* be rational in this sense to prefer mortality.

Clarifying these issues makes the solution to the symmetry problem much easier to see. It consists merely in noticing that whereas one sometimes has reason to believe one would be better off dying later, one rarely, if ever, has reason to believe one would be better off having come into existence earlier.[46] As such, though it might be conceivable for the lateness of one's conception to be bad for one, it will almost never be rational to wish one had been conceived significantly earlier, relative to one's epistemic standpoint. Put differently, though there might *be* reasons for one to take a disapproving attitude concerning the lateness of one's conception, one will almost never *have* reason to do so.

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[46] McMahan offers a similar argument. See his "The Lucretian Argument", 223–4.

Few of us, admittedly, can be *certain* about how bad our deaths will be; we very rarely know exactly how much longer we have to live and even more rarely know how exactly our lives were going to be if we were to die later. Nevertheless, in most circumstances, knowing how well our lives have gone and how well the lives of others who are like us have gone gives us some probabilistic reason to believe death will cut off the threads of our lives when there was still a lot we would have been better off doing and experiencing, given reasonable assumptions about how long we can expect to live.

By contrast, imagining one were conceived earlier—if coherent—typically involves imagining one's character to be very different in many hard-to-predict ways. It also typically involves imagining one is situated in circumstances which are different in many hard-to-predict ways. Indeed, the earlier one imagines oneself being brought into existence, the more different one must imagine one's biography and its effects on one's psychological and physical being to have been. While speculation about what would have happened if one were to die later is sometimes idyll, speculation about what would have happened if one had been conceived much earlier is probably always going to yield far less information. One rarely, if ever, has reason to suppose that one's life would have been longer or would have contained better things than one's actual life if it had started earlier.

4.4.3 The rationality of temporal bias

Some philosophers have argued that the symmetry problem can be answered by appealing to our temporal bias concerning future and past evils.[47] That we have such a temporal bias is usually thought to be shown by a thought experiment devised by Derek Parfit; one is asked to imagine oneself as a hospital patient who

[47] Most notably, John Martin Fischer & Anthony Brueckner, "The Asymmetry of Early Death and Late Birth", *Philosophical Studies* 71/3 (1993) 327–31.

is not sure whether he or she has already undergone and forgotten a long and excruciatingly painful medical operation or is due for a similarly excruciating but much shorter surgery soon.[48] Given that most of us, were we in this situation, would desperately wish not to have a painful operation ahead, even though it means having already had an even more painful operation, Parfit and others argues that we have a strong tendency to be more distressed at the prospect of future than past pain. Similar thought experiments are meant to suggest that we would typically prefer not to have less pleasure in the future, even if it means having had more pleasure in the past.

To apply this to the symmetry problem, the idea is that our asymmetrical attitudes to the lateness of our conception and the earliness of our death are to be explained with reference to our future-directed bias; while the goods from which one is precluded by not being conceived earlier would be in the past by now, the goods from which one is precluded by the earliness of one's death would be in one's future. If we care more about having goods in the future than about having goods in the past, then, we will be more troubled by the earliness of the ends of our lives than the lateness of their beginnings.

One shortcoming of this solution to the symmetry problem is that thought experiments like Parfit's do not show that we have a temporal bias regarding all goods and evils. As Jeff McMahan notices, we lack a future-directed bias when it comes to goods and evils associated with achievements; most of us would simply rather have greater achievements, and not have our efforts be in vain, regardless of whether this happens in our past or our future.[49] However, a more important shortcoming of this solution—and the standard objection to it—is that it merely *explains* but does not *justify* our asymmetrical attitudes towards the goods

[48] *Reasons and Persons*, 164–5.
[49] “The Lucretian Argument”, 219.

precluded by a late conceptions and by an early death.[50] Even if it is true we *are* typically more concerned about future than past goods and evils, but this does not to show that we *should* be more concerned about future than past goods and evils.

The most straightforward way to defend the view that it is more rational to regard an absence of goods in the future unfavourably than it is to regard an absence of goods in the past unfavourably would be to argue that the former is *worse* than the latter—perhaps simply because the former is in future and the latter is in past. However, as James Warren notices, this defence of temporal bias is inexplicable.[51] There is no apparent reason why lacking something valuable should be any less bad *simply* in virtue of being in the past than being in the future.

John Martin Fischer takes a different approach, arguing that "creatures with this specific sort of attitudinal asymmetry will have a greater chance of maximizing pleasure over time, and, arguably, being happier".[52] According to him, "[t]here is clear survival benefit to creatures who care especially about the future, so from an evolutionary perspective, there seems to be a 'point' to some sort of general asymmetry in our concern about the past and future".[53] Fischer argues, in other words, that the benefits of holding asymmetrical attitudes toward past and future privations are sufficient to make it rational to do so in all cases. But even if this is true, it would be merely to show that our asymmetrical attitudes are rational in the sense of being *prudent*, not in the sense of being *fitting* in the relevant case.

I am not sure that Fischer's generalized claim about the benefits of holding asymmetrical attitudes is correct. But there is,

[50] Frederik Kaufman, "Lucretius and Fear of Death", *Immortality and the Philosophy of Death*, Cholbi, Michael (ed.) (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016) 58.
[51] *Facing Death*, 86.
[52] John Martin Fischer, "Earlier Birth and Later Death: Symmetry Through Thick and Thin", repr. *in Our Stories: Essays on Life, Death and Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 74.
[53] "Earlier Birth and Later Death", 74.

nonetheless, at least one way in which the fact that one's death is in the future and one's conception in the past might influence the rationality of regarding each of these unfavourably. Specifically, while the timing of one's death is something which is usually something which one has some, albeit limited control to affect, the timing of one's conception is certainly not. As such, wishing to die later could be prudent insofar as it supports decisions which allow one to avoid mortal peril or otherwise extend one's longevity—by contrast, wishing to have been conceived earlier cannot be beneficial in the same manner.[54]

4.5 Badness, fittingness & prudence

The irrationality of regretting the lateness of one's conception has been thought to pose a special problem for the rationality of our attitudes regarding death. But there are other evils of privation which it seems irrational to regard unfavourably. According to Kai Draper, these present as powerful a challenge to the view that death merits disapproving attitudes.[55] On the hand, it would be irrational to be troubled by—to use Draper's examples—not being loved by everyone; not receiving a relaxing massage all the time; not having the incredible strength of Hercules; and not having found Aladdin's lamp. But, on the other hand, there certainly are evils of privation which merit disapproving attitudes. It would fitting to be distressed, for example, about being prevented by illness or injury from completing one's life's work. The challenge, therefore, is to explain under what conditions it is rational to regard evils of privation unfavourably—and the pressure to meet this challenge comes from the worry that, without a principled distinction, one would not be justified in

[54] See Travis Timmerman, "Avoiding the Asymmetry Problem", 101.
[55] See Draper's "Epicurean Equanimity Towards Death", 105; "Epicurus on the Value of Death", 78; "Death and Rational Emotion", 299; "Disappointment, Sadness, and Death", *The Philosophical Review* 108/4 (1999) 388–90.

thinking that death is among those evils of privation which merit disapproving attitudes.

Examples like those which Draper offers have also been thought to pose a parallel problem for the view that one is *harmed* by events and states which preclude one from further goods. In response this problem, Steven Luper proposes restricting the scope of a comparative account of harm: "Comparativism claims that things harm us by *making* our lives worse than they would have been otherwise," he writes, "[but] it is not so clear that our lives can be causally affected by 'negative events', or events that consist in things not happening, or by "negative states of affairs", or states of affairs that consist in things not holding".[56] In a similar fashion, one might be tempted to argue, in response to Draper's challenge, that it is inappropriate to hold disapproving attitudes concerning negative events and states of affairs—such as not coming into existence earlier, not being loved by everyone, and so on—because these are not *causally responsible* for how well one fares in life.[57]

There is, admittedly, some lack of clarity concerning the distinction between "negative events" or "negative states of affairs" and "positive events" or "positive states of affairs". Indeed, in regarding a negative event or state unfavourably, such as one's not coming to existence earlier, perhaps it might be correct to say that what one regards unfavourably is *the way things are* relative to *the way things would be* if one came into existence earlier. Nevertheless, an important fault with this proposal is that there are *prima facie* negative events or negative states, relevantly similar to each of the "negativities" given above, which it does seem appropriate to regard unfavourably. Consider: Though it might be irrational to regret the absence of superhuman strength and of an omnipotent genie from one's life, it

[56] *The Philosophy of Death*, 115.
[57] Draper considers a similar idea; see his "Disappointment, Sadness, and Death", 391.

seems appropriate to regret the absence of enjoyment and of knowledge. Similarly, though it might be irrational to be troubled by not being loved by everyone or continually massaged, it certainly would be rational to be troubled by being loved by no one or being in constant physical discomfort. Finally, though one's failure to come into existence at an earlier time does not seem regrettable, one's failure to complete important work by a specific deadline does seem to be. Given the similarity of these examples, it is far from clear that the distinction between negative and positive events and states should track the distinction between absences and failures which are rational to regard with disapproval and those which are not.

One striking feature of the examples Draper offers is that in none of these cases do the goods precluded appear to be *essential* for one to fare well, although one would fare better with them. It hardly seems that one would be prevented from having a life which is good on balance, one might think, by failing to come into existence earlier or by lacking superhuman strength or the assistance of an omnipotent genie. Accordingly, it might be proposed that whether it is appropriate to regard a scenario in which one is deprived of goods unfavourably depends on how *important* those goods are for having a life that is *all-things-considered* good.[58] Expressed more precisely, the thought is that it is fitting to regard an event or state which is comparatively bad unfavourably only if lacking the additional goods present in the alternative significantly impairs one's chances of leading a life which is good overall.

But the problem is that there does not seem to be—in this context at least—a specific degree of goodness which is undoubtedly enough for a life to be *all-things-considered* good. In fact, while it may be especially regrettable for a person not to "break even" with respect to the goodness of her life—that is, not to

[58] Luper proposes something similar regarding when a deprivation of goods should count as a harm; see his *The Philosophy of Death*, 116–7.

have a life which contains as many goods as evils—it is far from obvious that the absence of further goods in a life which merely breaks even is never regrettable. But then what amount of goodness between enough to merely break even and the maximum degree of goodness possible should count as the threshold for having a life which is all-things-considered good, beyond which the absence of further goods is not to be regarded unfavourably?

I doubt there is a compelling answer. Instead, it seems to me that, in this context, the notion of a life which is all-things-considered good has unclear boundaries of application, like the concepts which generate the Sorites Paradox: Just as there is no specific number of grains which are needed to make a heap, so that no single grain makes the difference between something which is a heap and something which is not, there does not seem to be a specific amount of goodness which makes the difference between a life in which the lack of further goods is regrettable and in which it is not at all. Indeed, consider that if one sold an old lamp to a boy named Aladdin only to find out later that one could have had even one's most wild wishes granted, then—once the shocking realization that there is real magic in the world has sunk in!—one would probably be very upset about this. For someone truly in this situation, such a reaction would not obviously be irrational.

Another striking feature of Draper's examples is that the modes of benefit of which we are deprived in each of them are, in different ways, *unrealistic*. Accordingly, some philosophers have argued that it is not genuinely a misfortune to lack something valuable if there was no realistic possibility of having had it. Jeff McMahan calls this the *realism condition*.[59] Indeed, he goes so far as to claim that for concept of deprivation to be applicable to a given case, "a good must have been genuinely in prospect but then have been prevented by some intervening condition".[60]

[59] *The Ethics of Killing*, 133.
[60] *Ibid.*, 133.

Similarly, David Suits suggests that “[t]o be deprived of something is to fail to get good things that were in some sense expected”.[61] Draper himself argues along the same lines, suggesting that “[w]henever someone is prevented from receiving a large benefit that she was very likely to receive and, hence, reasonably hoped to receive, she has suffered a misfortune”.[62]

There are, however, a variety of ways in which some possibility might be unrealistic, and different degrees to which it might be so. Worlds in which one is loved by everyone or continually massaged differ significantly from the actual world in terms of particular fact. But worlds in which one comes into existence earlier may also differ from the actual world in terms of involving some violation of laws concerning the way things work—in other words, in terms of involving miracles relative to the laws governing the actual world. Finally, worlds in which one has the strength of Hercules or the service of an omnipotent genie seem to differ from the actual world in terms of widespread violations of law.[63]

To imagine what would have been the case if some event had not occurred, or some state of affairs had not obtained, necessarily involves imaging a world in which there is some departure from *particular facts* in the actual world. If *anything* which is comparatively bad is to be an evil worth regarding unfavourably relative to a counterfactual case, therefore, it must be allowed that it is appropriate to regard the counterfactual case favourably despite its being unrealistic in this manner. But the problem is that the line between possibilities which diverge from the actual world in terms of diverging from *particular fact* and those

[61] “Why Death is not Bad for the One Who Dies”, 270.

[62] “Disappointment, Sadness, and Death”, 393.

[63] This is perhaps less obvious about worlds in which one has superhuman strength. It might be argued that one could have had superhuman strength if particular facts about the evolutionary history of humanity were different. These sorts of dramatic changes to history, however, might threaten the possibility of one’s coming into existence as the person one is; see section *4.4.2*.

which diverge in terms of *violating law* is not very clear. After all, if determinism is true—that is, if, at any given time, there is only one possible future allowed by the laws governing the world—then to imagine a divergence from the particular facts of the actual world, while holding fixed *any* facts about the past, requires imagining at least some localized violations of law. It would be absurd, however, to think that whether some event or state is a fitting object of approval or disapproval depends on whether determinism is true.[64] As such, the realism condition should be rejected.

It seems clear enough that there is something *diminished* about the rationality of regretting the absence of omnipotent genies and superhuman strength from one's life. Our sense that this is so, moreover, does not depend on scepticism about the value of such unrealistic states of affairs. It is not clear, however, that regarding the absence of such conditions with disapproving attitudes is irrational in the sense of being *inappropriate*. Indeed, the problems which arise for attempts to neatly demarcate those evils of privation which merited disapproving attitudes from those which do not should incline us toward the worry that such attempts proceed from a mistaken assumption about what needs to be explained.

Rather, it seems that what needs to be explained here can be explained by appealing to a simple idea; namely, that it tends to be *imprudent* to be troubled very intensely and very often by matters which are beyond one's control to affect. This is, in fact, something of a truism, embodied in the cliché, "There's no use crying over spilt milk". The point is, of course, that there is no clear benefit to be reaped from being upset about something when doing so cannot help one to change the situation, especially seeing that the unpleasantness of emotional distress makes one's situation that much worse. Realism thus enters the

[64] Travis Timmerman makes a similar point; see his "Your Death Might be the Worst Thing Ever to Happen to You (But Maybe You Shouldn't Care)", 26.

picture indirectly, insofar as no amount of pining for unattainable possibilities can help one to bring them about. But the realm of what lies beyond our control to affect extends further than this. For instance, we sometimes find our fortune being decided by the actions of individuals who are too remote for us to affect—we find ourselves facing evils which might easily have been avoided, but which we, as individuals, are powerless to escape. In those situations too, the same truism seems applicable.

It should be emphasized, though, that the proposal is certainly *not* that we resign ourselves to whatever may come our way—that we cultivate indifference to the whims of fate for pragmatic reasons; *nor* is the intended import of this proposal that we should not wish for longer lives, since this depends to a large extent on chance and circumstance; *nor* that we should regard as irrational those moments of terror in contemplating our inevitable annihilation. For starters, the kind of control regarding an event or state of affairs which is needed for our attitudes about it to yield some benefit in motivating behaviour is not *absolute*; though we have *limited* control over how and when we die, so long as our decisions and actions are still able to *influence* this, it will not be a complete waste of one's time to be preoccupied with wanting one's life to be longer. Indeed, supposing it were possible to do so, it would be terribly detrimental to forgo the desire for more life in the face of some threat of mortal peril if that threat could be overcome. What's more, it is also clear that we are entitled to speak of anything more than *tendencies* when it comes to talking about the usefulness of different attitudes concerning death. There does not appear to be a set of *exceptionless* rules describing when it is beneficial to regard some event or state with approval or disapproval. Consider that wishing for the impossible, or the near-impossible, obviously will obviously not help one to get what one wishes for, but it could conceivably have less direct benefits; for example, as Samantha Vice argues, wishing for what one cannot realistically attain could serve the

important purpose of clarifying the structure of our values, revealing what we care about most in the world.[65] There are, finally, no mathematical formulae to be utilized in weighing reasons of fittingness for holding some attitude against reasons of prudence for tempering or abandoning that attitude. The upshot of this is that, even if spending every moment paralysed by dead of death is not wise, there are no grounds for thinking that having perceptive moments in which the full terror of one's eventual oblivion is brought forward is incompatible with recognizing the imprudence of obsessing over the inevitable or the unchangable.

Conclusion

The story about which attitudes concerning death are *all-things-considered* rational is complex and potentially unsystematic, depending on a number of factors which vary according to circumstance. The story about which attitudes concerning death are *appropriate* or *fitting*, on the other hand, is much simpler. If dying at some time is worse than continuing to live in some imagined scenario, then it is appropriate to wish for the latter over the former. We need not abandon this straightforward view in order to explain why it is typically irrational to regret not having come into existence earlier nor to explain why it is irrational to regret not having found Aladdin's lamp. There is at least one complication, however; it seems that, if death is to plausibly be a fitting object of non-contrastive negative attitudes, our annihilation in death would need to be an evil in itself. But it is not clear that there is an argument for this view which would be compelling for those who are not already sympathetic to it.

[65] Samantha Vice, "On Persons and Immortality", *South African Journal of Philosophy* 23/4 (2004) 367 n. 6.

5
Mortality & Immortality

> [G]iven the simple choice between living for another week and dying in five minutes I would always choose to live for another week; and by a version of mathematical induction I conclude that I would be glad to live forever.
>
> Thomas Nagel[1]

5.1 Two questions about mortality and immortality

The aim of this chapter is to provide an answer to two related questions concerning mortality and immortality. First, given the option, would it be rational to choose to be immortal? And, second, is it appropriate to wish one were immortal rather than mortal? The first of these questions is not one which any of us have a pressing interest in answering; as I noticed in the introduction, those seeking to escape death altogether face insuperable challenges, seeing that—as far as modern science tells us—our planet will not last forever and the universe will eventually become inhospitable to life. Even so, answering this first question helps to inform our answer to the second question, concerning the appropriateness of certain attitudes, which is what ultimately interests me here. On the one hand, if it were rational to choose to be immortal, then it would seem appropriate to wish for immortality. On the other hand, if it were never rational to choose to be immortal, as some philosophers have

[1] *The View from Nowhere*, 224.

argued, then it would seem inappropriate to regret one's mortality. The purpose of this chapter is to resist this latter view and to defend the more modest view that immortality would be worth choosing under certain conditions, such that we have some reason to prefer it to mortality.

An immediate challenge to determining whether immortality is choiceworthy and mortality regrettable is that there are sundry ways to be immortal. Of course, the closest possible world in which we are immortal—the one which departs the least from the way things are in the actual world—would be one in which we would continue to age in a similar manner, remain vulnerable to the same non-fatal illnesses and injuries, and so on. In such a world, we would experience—as far as it could be experienced without dying—bodily decline and the associated deterioration of our mental faculties. Moreover, given that several injuries and illness become statistical certainties over an infinite timespan, we would very likely have to endure the gradual accumulation of some permanent disabilities and diseases.[2] In short, a world which was the same in all respects except for the fact of our morality would be one in which we probably find ourselves headed toward an unending and gratuitously miserable combination of immobility, chronic pain, substantial sensory deprivation, depression and dementia. A world which is simply like ours minus the inevitability of death would apparently have us each confronting fates worse than death eventually. So, it might seem that it is not appropriate to regret one's morality in favour of immortality.

[2] Eternal life without eternal youth is the fate in Greek mythology of Tithonus, whose lover, the goddess Eos, is unfortunately imprecise in expressing her wishes to Zeus, as well as the immortals in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels.* In the film *Death Becomes Her* (1996), immortals who can survive even the most severe injuries become desperate to keep a talented plastic surgeon to repair the damage their bodies inevitably endure.

However, this sort of reply seems largely to miss the point. It fails to address the concerns which motivate most of us to contemplate the desirability of immortality. The concerns which underlie such a preoccupation are rarely, if ever, directed *merely* at one's mortality. Instead, those interested in the choice between mortality and immortality are typically concerned with whether we would be better off were fundamental conditions of our existence altered. Those gripped by the idea of immortality are more probably concerned that some sort of immortal life would be much better than the sort of mortal lives we have. If this were the case, then a certain aspect of the fundamental conditions of our existence—of which our mortality is a central part—may be regrettable. Put differently, if immortality were choiceworthy *under appropriate conditions*, then what may be regrettable is one's mortality *together with* the absence of those conditions which would make immortality worthwhile. Accordingly, given this interpretation of our underlying concerns, a better way of rendering the central questions of this chapter might be this: Are any of the sundry ways of being immortal worth choosing? And should we prefer to possess one of those kinds of immortality?

As was just mentioned, some philosophers have attempted to show that there is *no* kind of immortal life which is choiceworthy, so that we should be glad of our mortality for at least this reason. More precisely, following Bernard Williams, many of them argue that we face a dilemma with respect to the desirability of immortality. Williams defends the view that an immortal life would either fail to be attractive or fail to involve a preservation of one's personal identity.[3] According to his argument, an immortal life would, eventually, either become wretched or involve one's transformation into a new, different person. In the latter case, what one would have is not a genuine immortal existence. Even so, the sorts of "immortal" existence which fail to

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[3] See "The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality".

ensure the continuity of the same person for eternity might nonetheless constitute a desirable state of affairs. But it would not obviously be one which is desirable for prudential, or self-interested, reasons. Given these sorts of arguments, it is worth reflecting whether plausible conditions for immortality's being choiceworthy undermine the possibility of a continuity of identity. In the last part of this chapter, I argue that choiceworthy ways of being immortal do not necessarily undermine the possibility of a continuity of identity in any problematic way.

5.2 A menu of immortality

To begin, it is helpful to notice some distinctions concerning different ways in which immortality might be conceived.[4] For some of these ways of being immortal, our prospect of preserving our identities while coming to possess them are far more dubious than for others. First of all, one might conceive of immortality in a *temporal* manner—involving the evasion of death by means of enduring through time indefinitely—or, as God's immortality is understood in some religious traditions, in an *atemporal* manner—involving the evasion of death through a transcendence of time altogether. Immortality might be conceived as *atomistic*—involving the continuity of discrete individuals—or as *non-atomistic*—involving the fusion of different individuals into an immortal being, as in those schools of spiritual thought which promise that we become "one with the universe". One should also distinguish between *corporeal* and *incorporeal* forms of immortality. And, among the former, between those which involve enduring through time in the same physical body and those

[4] The distinctions made here are drawn from John Martin Fischer & Ruth Curl, "Philosophical Models of Immortality in Science Fiction", repr. in *Stories: Essays on Life, Death and Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 93–102; as well as Thaddeus Metz, *Meaning in Life: An Analytic Study* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 125–6.

which involve existing in a *series* of forms, as in religious accounts of reincarnation and science-fiction stories of one's consciousness being preserved as software transferred from one hardware form to another.

Of these different kinds of immortality, there is *prima facie* reason to be suspicious that coming to have an atemporal, non-atomistic, incorporeal or serial immortality *would not* involve a form of death for us, seeing that these all fail to ensure the continuity of a specific organism through time in the same manner as our mortal lives. This is not to say that these kinds of immortality are, in fact, necessarily unavailable to us. It lies beyond the scope of my own inquiry to determine whether it is inconceivable for us to become immortal in these ways. But worries about running afoul of the second horn Williams' dilemma provide some reason to focus instead on the ways of being immortal which contrast with these.

Even when one focusses exclusively on temporal, atomistic, corporeal and non-serial forms of immortality, one finds further differences in how one might conceive immortality relevant to its desirability. As alluded to before, an immortal life would not seem choiceworthy unless those choosing it were assured reasonably good health and vigour through the elimination of those aspects of aging associated with physical and mental deterioration. Moreover, it would need to be stipulated that the means by which immortality is acquired are not so unappealing as to make it altogether not worth choosing. For example, if ensuring one's immortality required feasting upon the blood of innocents rather than, say, drinking the elixir of immortality once off or, alternatively, undergoing a single medical operation under anaesthetic, then immortality could be sufficiently unattractive to be worth rejecting.

One should also notice that since being mortal entails being a creature for whom death is *inevitable*, at least given the laws of nature, there are diverse ways of conceiving the modal status of

immortality. Being immortal might entail being a creature for whom death is *impossible*, but it might also be understood so that it involves being a creature for whom is *possible*, albeit not *inevitable*. That is, immortality might entail either "absolute immortality" or else "immortability".[5] Indeed, there are a variety of ways to have immortability, each distinguished by what are taken to be sufficient causes of death. One might imagine someone with immortability to be vulnerable to the same non-natural causes of death to which we are currently vulnerable; to be vulnerable to only some non-natural causes of death; or even to be vulnerable to these only after a deliberate choice to opt out of the protected condition which she has enjoyed.

The central distinction here is important because it allows us to notice that certain criticisms which apply to absolute immortality are not apt when it comes to immortability. Consider, for instance, Samantha Brennan's argument that immortality would not be worth choosing because it would involve the absence of the freedom to end one's life.[6] Also consider David Belgin's argument that immortality would not be worth choosing because it would entail the significant risk of an inescapable, miserable fate.[7] Both of these problems for immortality are avoided if it is open to the immortal—as it is for those who possess immortability—to voluntarily elect to die, when, for example, her quality of life become so poor as to make continued existence not worthwhile. Certainly, for someone who is capable of living forever might confront a significantly greater misfortune in death than

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[5] The term "immortability" is associated with the work of William Hocking; see his *The Meaning of Immortality in Human Experience* (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1957). However, Hocking does not seem to have coined the phrase.

[6] Samantha Brennan, "The Badness of Death, The Wrongness of Killing, and the Moral Importance of Autonomy", *Dialogue* 40/4 (2001) 734.

[7] David Belgin, "Should I Choose to Never Die? Williams, Boredom, and the Significance of Mortality", *Philosophical Studies* 174/8 (2017) 2011–5.

we ordinarily do—a greater preclusion of further goods. As such, the decision to end her existence would be far more momentous and, as a result, more agonizing. Nevertheless, as David Benatar emphasizes, this potential disadvantage of immortability would need to be weighed against, on the one hand, the disadvantages of involuntary mortality, which similarly includes the risk of facing serious misfortune in death, and, on the other hand, the disadvantages of involuntary immortality.[8] Once it has been, it is less than clear that immortability could not be the best of these options.

Finally, one can distinguish between different possible worlds where one may choose to become immortal according how widely distributed the option to become immortal is. On the one end of the spectrum of possibilities, there are those in which the option of immortality is open to everyone; on the other end, those in which one would be choosing to be the only immortal; and between these extremes, worlds in which immortality would be available only to some portion of the population.

Some have argued that unless a substantial number of one's loved ones and friends were to acquire immortality too, it would not be worth choosing. Richard Momeyer, for instance, predicts that after having eventually lost all of one's nearest and dearest from youth, as well as whomever one loves and befriends after their passing, and after theirs, and so on, all while the world continues its path of radical change, the isolated immortal would eventually encounter "insuperable barriers to sustaining the kinds of human relationships that make life worthwhile and meaningful".[9] Christine Overall, by contrast, questions Momeyer's assertion that the immortal individual must eventually be unable to form new significant relationships. She points out

[8] Benatar, *The Human Predicament*,153–4.

[9] Richard Momeyer, *Confronting Death* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press) 38.

that the challenges introduced by loss and radical change are ones are not only also present in mortal life but sometimes positively overcome.[10] But, regardless of whether the potential disadvantages of being the only immortal would provide sufficient reason for anyone to reject such an existence, the most appealing option seems nearly undoubtedly to be one which included the availability of immortality to one's loved ones and friends. As such, that this would be the case might be plausibly included among the conditions under which immortality would be choiceworthy.

5.3 *A world of immortals*

Some philosophers argue that the desirability of immortality falters upon detailed reflection on the final set of possibilities mentioned in the previous section, concerning how widely distributed the option to become immortal is. These philosophers endorse in some form Lucretius' argument that, because the passing of old generations is necessary for new generations to thrive, "life is granted to no one for permanent ownership [but] to all on lease".[11] Most prominently, Martha Nussbaum argues that while, on the one hand, it would constitute an injustice for immortality to be unfairly available only to a few, if immortality were open to everyone, and continually chosen by a substantial portion of the population, then we would soon face massive overpopulation relative to our shared resources. That is, unless immortality were accompanied by restrictions on procreation to limit the size of the population.[12] The upshot of these considerations in her assessment is that "[i]f not consoled, we can be to at least some extent reconciled to mortality by reflecting on the

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[10] *Aging, Death, and Human Longevity*, 142–3.
[11] *On the Nature of Things,* 94 [3.971].
[12] *The Therapy of Desire*, 222–4; "The Damage of Death", 41–3.

fact that the deaths of the currently living are a necessary condition for the perpetuation of ways of life that we greatly value, and that are perhaps central to the value we attach to living".[13]

But why would it be so bad to limit the size of the population by limiting procreation? One might imagine procreation being kept available to those who voluntarily opt out of eternal life. For example, one might imagine, as Benatar proposes[14], that the elixir of immortality induced sterility and could only be successfully taken before puberty. One might also imagine that the "antidote" to immortality restored one's fertility. If this were the condition of immortals, then one might choose immortality while retaining the freedom to procreate, albeit with a significant cost involved in exercising this liberty. Someone in this situation would be afforded both the choice to live forever and the choice to procreate. She would, admittedly, be forced to compromise on one of these for the sake of the other. Yet similar compromises are not absent from mortal life. As such, a fairly distributed and sustainable offer of immortality need not entail, as Nussbaum

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[13] "The Damage of Death", 43. I focus on Nussbaum's presentation of this objection to immortality. But it can also be found in John Wood, *Engineered Death: Abortion, Suicide, Euthanasia and Senecide* (Ottawa: Ottawa University Press, 1978) 128; Peter Singer, "Research into Aging: Should it be Guided by the Interests of Present Individuals, Future Individuals, or the Species?", *Life Span Extension: Consequences and Open Questions*, Ludwig, Frédéric (ed.) (New York, NY: Springer, 1991) 132–45; Todd May, *Death*, 88–90; the fictional Dr Hilda Cummings of James Lenman's "Immortality: A Letter", repr. in *Life, Death & Meaning: Key Philosophical Readings on the Big Questions*, Benatar, David (ed.) (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995) 234–5; and—in a qualified form—Christine Overall, *Aging, Death, and Human Longevity*, 133–40. Unlike the rest, Wood and Singer argue against limits on procreation because these would, according to them, infringe upon the interests of *future* generations to come into existence. While I find it questionable that future generations have an interest in coming into existence and that such interests should be weighed equally against the interests of those who have already come into existence, I set these issues aside. My final reply to Nussbaum also constitutes a reply to Wood and Singer's argument.

[14] *The Human Predicament*, 152.

suggests, forgoing "a distinctive type of freedom to which we currently attach considerable importance".[15]

Still, Nussbaum offers two additional objections to this reply to her argument. First, she argues that a world in which procreation were eliminated or greatly reduced would be lacking in the goods associated with child rearing and intergenerational relations. Echoing Nussbaum's sentiments, Christine Overall writes that it would be "a cost not only to individuals themselves, who would be denied experiences such as pregnancy, breastfeeding, and the rearing of children, but also to the culture as a whole, which would suffer a staggering loss of relationships and interactions with babies and children and the invigoration and renewal provided by the presence of young people".[16] Second, Nussbaum argues that those who desire immortality under conditions which included limited procreation would be desiring to be "parasites on the very system that their immortality must subvert", given that they have benefitted from being reared, mentored and cared for by older generations, while now "opting for a world in which these relationships no longer exist".[17]

In reply, it is worth pointing out that the extent of the problem of overpopulation—and so the extent to which a solution based on limiting procreation is needed—depends largely upon how many people would choose to be immortal. As such, it may be that desiring immortality *under appropriate conditions* would involve desiring a world in which one was among a relatively small group of people who voluntarily chose to be capable of living forever rather than procreate; a world, in other words, in which the system of intergenerational relationships from which oneself and others have benefitted remains largely intact. In short, it is conceivable that one might choose immortality in circumstances which are immune to all of Nussbaum's objections.

[15] "The Damage of Death", 42.
[16] *Aging, Death, and Human Longevity*, 137.
[17] "The Damage of Death", 43.

How significant the problem of overpopulation is for immortality also depends upon the extent to which immortals are assumed to impose upon shared resources in order to lead worthwhile lives. Thus, one means of diminishing the problem is to imagine that immortals require a negligible amount of resources to sustain satisfying lives—though this will do nothing to alleviate concerns about the spatial limits of the planet. Similarly, another tempting reply to this argument is to simply reject another of the assumptions upon which the problem rests by imaging immortality in a world where interplanetary travel, new technologies or both have indefinitely increased the availability of vital resources.

There is some reason to avoid, as far as possible, eliminating the problems of immortality through such far-fetched stipulations—or rather, through continually adding more to the far-fetched stipulations I have already made! The greater the number of fundamental features of our situation we attempt to imagine altered, the greater the demands we make on our imagination to provide reliable visions of those alternatives. While this is a worry, though, there is no reason to assume ahead of time that questions about what an immortal existence would be like are unanswerable. Indeed, I hope that this chapter itself, as an exercise, will demonstrate that we are able to find justification for answers to some of these questions through rational argumentation.

Regardless, whether immortality was unfairly made available only to a few, including oneself, or to everyone, but at the risk of placing severe strain on the planets resources, it would not necessarily be the case that one's *own* immortal life would be negatively affected. Indeed, even if the world of immortals was headed for overpopulation, as Overall notices, "I, as an immortal, might be able to avoid suffering from its worst depredations".[18] As such, regardless of the truth of Nussbaum's conclusion, the

[18] *Aging, Death, and Human Longevity*, 140.

possibility of an immortal life which would be good for the immortal individual remains. That is, the possibility that one's mortal condition is regrettable from a *self-interested* perspective remains, even if immortality were undesirable from an *other-regarding* or *moral* perspective. Put in another way, one might have egoistic reasons to desire some sort of immortal life despite the fact that there are non-egoistic reasons not to desire it. What remains to be seen, therefore, is whether immortality could not be choiceworthy on self-interested grounds.[19]

Fortunately, however, the puzzle of determining whether the moral problems Nussbaum raises would make immortality *all-things-considered* undesirable can be avoided by noticing that all of these can be avoided at the same time. Again, if few took up the option of immortality, though it were available to everyone, then there would neither be the injustice of an unfair distribution of the opportunity for immortality nor the potential disadvantages of overpopulation and of limiting procreation, respectively. It has not yet been shown to be irrational to prefer immortality under such conditions to the sort of mortal existence we possess.

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[19] Another potential clash between one's own interests and the interests of others which might emerge in a world where immortality were available to everyone would arise for those with more misanthropic dispositions; in particular, those who, like Samantha Vice, worry that the prospect of enduring for eternity an "overwhelming weariness at humanity's depravity" would render immortality altogether undesirable ("On Persons and Immortality", 369). If this worry were well-founded, it would seem to be in one's interests for immortality to be available only to those members of the whole population who one finds agreeable. But this would clearly be unfair. However, it is worth noticing that if there is conflict between the desirability of immortality from an individual perspective and from a collective perspective, it may be that this conflict of interests is *itself* an appropriate object of regret.

5.4 Is a mortal life meaningless?

In the next section, I attend to the surprisingly popular view that an immortal life would not be choiceworthy. Some of those who defend this view—most notably Williams—argue for it on the basis of another view; namely, that the life of an immortal would necessarily be meaningless. For now, however, I offer some reflection on a view which is equally gripping—if not among philosophers, at least among laypeople concerned with life's big questions; namely, the view that a *mortal* life is necessarily meaningless.

The most fundamental, and most frustrating, obstacle to be faced in assessing these competing claims consists in getting a clear sense of what these opposing claims *mean*. To describe a life as *meaningless* naturally seems to contrast not merely with the describing a life as *having meaning* but also with describing a life as *being meaningful*. But this latter pair of phrases do not seem to be equivalent in meaning.[20] Obviously, one manner of understanding questions about whether a life "has meaning" or "is meaningful" would construe these as questions about whether it has a semantic meaning or expresses meanings, respectively. However, equally obviously, this is not what concerns most of us inclined to ask whether our lives are meaningless.

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[20] Importantly, questions about whether one's life "has meaning" or "is meaningful" are each also distinct in meaning from—though clearly associated with—the question, "What is the meaning of life?". Timothy Mawson emphasizes the persistent ambiguity of the latter question, arguing that its "polyvalence" is responsible for our equally persistent feelings of dissatisfaction with anything that is offered as an answer to it; see his "Sources of Dissatisfaction with Answers to the Question of the Meaning of Life", *European Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 2/2 (2010) 19–41. His view, which is increasingly popular among those writing about life's meaning, is that questions about "the meaning of life" stand for, as R. W. Hepburn puts it, "amalgams of logically diverse questions, some coherent and answerable, some neither" ("Questions about the Meaning of Life", repr. in *Exploring the Meaning of Life: An Anthology and Guide*, Seachris, Joshua W. (ed.) (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012) 49).

Instead, to say that a life "has meaning" seems, in this context, to connote its having purpose, significance or importance. But it remains unclear why either an immortal or a mortal life should necessarily lack purpose, significance or importance, unless these ideas are interpreted in a more precise manner.

Thaddeus Metz has argued that questions about a life's *meaningfulness* or about *meaning in life* are questions about a "cluster of ideas" which share only "a family resemblance".[21] A central part of this family resemblance consists in the fact that these all refer, ultimately, to something which possesses a certain kind of value, distinct from pleasure and often included in *objective list* theories of well-being.[22] On this analysis, meaning in life is a component of life's quality. More specifically, Metz argues that the concept of life's meaningfulness connotes a kind of prudential value a person's life possesses in virtue of serving some purpose worthy of pursuit, transcending her animal nature or meriting emotions of esteem (from herself) and admiration (from others).[23] Forgoing much of the precision of this formulation, one might say that a life *is meaningful* in this sense in virtue of *having meaning*—in the sense of having purpose, significance or importance. According to Metz, this *concept* is at the core of debates in the academic literature about different *conceptions* of meaning in life—different theories of what is common to all meaningful lives and absent from meaningless lives.

While Metz's exact analysis of talk about meaning in life might not capture everything one might mean in talking about life's meaningfulness, this general way of interpreting the concept of meaning in life—as a component of well-being—certainly plays a central role in most contemporary discussions of it in the "analytic" philosophical literature. More importantly, it is appropriate

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[21] *Meaning in Life*, 34–6.

[22] *Ibid.*, 59–74. For a brief description of an influential taxonomy of theories of well-being, see section *2.1*.

[23] *Ibid.*, 18–9.

to interpreting the competing claims concerning whether an immortal or mortal life is necessarily meaningless as these figure in debates about whether immortality is choiceworthy. That said, it should be noted that if meaning in life is understood to be merely a *component* of well-being or, in other words, simply one of many prudential goods, then an immortal or mortal existence might nonetheless be preferable to the alternative in spite of lacking meaningfulness. Even so, if being mortal by necessity entailed having a life which was lacking in meaningfulness, there would certainly be *pro tanto* reason to consider immortality worth choosing and one's mortality regrettable. The question then is whether there is good reason to suppose that immortality is a requirement for a life to be meaningful.

5.4.1 Meaninglessness due to a lack of moral goods

Three main rationales for an immortality requirement from the literature are helpfully captured by Metz.[24] The first of these asserts that a mortal life would be meaningless because lacking in important moral goods.[25] One version of this rationale centres on the contention that, for a person's life to be meaningful, she must come to possess moral perfection—that is, an ideal set of dispositions—something which is presumed to require an eternal existence. Another version comes from the idea, given poetic expression in the Old Testament, that life is meaningless because "all share a common destiny—the righteous and the wicked, the good and the bad, the clean and the unclean, those who offer sacrifices and those who do not"; namely, annihilation.[26] Put more plainly, the idea is that meaning in life requires realizing justice by having each person get what she deserves, which in

[24] See *Meaning in Life*, 124–33.
[25] See *ibid.*, 124–8.
[26] Ecclesiastes 9:2, *New International Version*.

turn requires that each of us do not confront the same fate in death but are either rewarded or punished forever.

The second version of this rationale seems especially questionable. In particular, the relation it posits between this kind of justice and life's meaningfulness, interpreted as a prudential good, is dubious. After all, why should the meaningfulness of *my* life, in this sense, depend on whether *everyone* gets what they deserve? The link between the latter and the former appears tendentious at best. Indeed, I suspect that casting this as a rationale for the immortality requirement for life's meaningfulness involves conflating the implausible view that whether one does good or evil is meaningless in the sense that it does not matter if death awaits all with the view that one's actions fail to confer the special sort of value under consideration here on one's life if death awaits all.

There are other reasons to dismiss this first argument for the immortality requirement for meaning in life. Importantly, neither version of this first rationale implies that a mortal life would be completely lacking in meaningfulness. This is because neither of the requirements for meaning in life posited by these rationales implies that a life which ends could not be meaningful. First of all, there is a dilemma concerning the proposal that meaning in life requires realizing justice by having us rewarded or punished for eternity, given the plausible assumption that individuals could only *deserve* to be so rewarded or punished if they did something infinitely good or infinitely bad, respectively. Namely, either there are no acts of infinite moral value or disvalue which could be performed in a finite amount of time—in which case there would be nothing one could do in a mortal life which would necessitate continuing to exist forever for justice to be served—or such deeds are possible—in which case appropriate rewards and punishments matching these deeds could,

presumably, be doled out in a finite amount of time too.[27] Similarly, a dilemma applies to the second version of the rationale: If a perfect moral constitution or an ideal set of moral dispositions could be cultivated in a finite amount of time, then immortality would not be necessary for meaning in life even supposing the latter requires this. But if a moral perfection could not be achieved in a finite amount of time, then there would never be any point in time at which an immortal really achieved this condition.

Finally, it is doubtful that a lack of certain moral goods from a person's life need entail the absence of meaningfulness, for the simple reason that it is doubtful that moral goodness is the only source of meaning in life. It is more plausible that meaning in life might come, as Metz puts it,

> from a variety of non-moral sources, such as intellectual discoveries or aesthetic creations; after all, beyond 'the good' (morality) are also 'the true' (enquiry) and 'the beautiful' (creativity) as quintessential sources of meaning in life, that is, higher-order purposes to pursue or conditions in which to take great pride.[28]

5.4.2 Meaninglessness due to impermanence

The two further rationales for the immortality requirement for meaning in life identified by Metz seem to track much more widespread worries about meaning and mortality.[29] The first of these is the argument that immortality is necessary for life's meaningfulness because the latter requires doing something of ultimate consequence by making a permanent difference to the world. It is given poignant expression by William Lane Craig, who writes of a mortal life:

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[27] See Metz, *Meaning in Life*, 125.
[28] Thaddeus Metz, "Meaning in Life", *The Palgrave Handbook of the Afterlife*, Nagasawa, Yujn & Benjamin Matheson (eds.) (London: Macmillan Publishers) 359.
[29] *Meaning in Life*, 128–33.

> With no hope of immortality, man's life leads only to the grave. His life is but a spark in the infinite blackness, a spark that appears, flickers, and dies forever. Compared to the infinite stretch of time, the span of man's life is but an infinitesimal moment [...] The contributions of the scientist to the advance of human knowledge, the researches of the doctor to alleviate pain and suffering, the efforts of the diplomat to secure peace in the world, the sacrifices of good people everywhere to better the lot of the human race—all these come to nothing. In the end they don't make a bit of difference, not one bit. Each person's life is therefore without ultimate significance.[30]

The third and final rationale for the immortality requirement, closely related to the previous one, proceeds from some of Robert Nozick's views about meaning in life, mentioned in the first chapter.[31] According to Nozick, "[f]or a life to be meaningful, it must connect with other things, with some things or values beyond itself" or, put differently, must transcend "the limits of individual life", because "[t]he problem of meaning is created by limits, by being just this, by being merely this".[32] Nozick argues that "the narrower the limits of life, the less meaningful it is" and that "[t]o be puzzled about why death seems to undercut meaning is to fail to see the temporal limit as a limit".[33]

If this rationale is to be fully understood, of course, it would need to be specified exactly which ways of transcending limits are relevant to meaning in life. For example, one might follow Metz in saying that relevant ways of connecting should include *honouring* as well as *promoting* such value[34] and perhaps accept

[30] William Lane Craig, "The Absurdity of Life without God", repr. in *Exploring the Meaning of Life: An Anthology and Guide*, Seachris, Joshua W. (ed.) (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012) 158, 160.
[31] See section 2.4.1.
[32] Robert Nozick, "Philosophy and the Meaning of Life", 81–2.
[33] *Meaning in Life*, 81.
[34] *Meaning in Life*, 29.

Neil Levy's suggestion that a person's life is meaningless to the extent that it fails to connect specifically with values beyond her mere *animal* nature.[35] For now, an intuitive understanding of Nozick's proposal is sufficient for assessing its success in supporting the immortality requirement.[36]

Again, the trouble is that neither of these rationales entail the immortality requirement. Even granting Nozick's view that a person confers meaning on her life through transcending her own limits, it remains the case that meaning in life could be obtained through the transcendence of other limits, such as our spatial limits, the limits of our capacities or the limits of our significance, seeing that the temporal limit imposed on each of us by our mortality is not the only boundary of our individual existence. Indeed, as we noticed in the first chapter, Nozick allows that one obtain some meaning in one's life by leaving traces of oneself, since this is "a way of going beyond or seeping beyond" the limits of our finitude.[37] In other words, he concedes that there

[35] Neil Levy, "Downshifting and Meaning in Life", *Ratio* 18/2 (2005) 177–80.

[36] Brooke Alan Trisel offers a curious reversal of Nozick's argument. He proposes that since a temporal limit would be absent from a life that lasted forever, the presence of death provides an opportunity for making one's life more meaningful which would otherwise be lost; see his "Does Death Give Meaning to Life?", *Journal of Philosophy of Life* 5/2 (2015) 70–1. But this seems to rely on a misinterpretation of Nozick's view. Though it is true on his view that a life is made more meaningful by overcoming its limits, he denies that limits are needed for a life to be meaningful. Instead, Nozick's suggestion is that insofar as one were unlimited, questions about the meaningfulness of one's existence would simply not arise, because there would be nothing which threatens it in the first place. On the transcendence view of life's meaningfulness, as David Benatar explains, "[t]he quest for meaning would not arise if we were not limited. God, presumably, would not worry about the meaning of his life. God would not worry about whether he was fulfilling some external purpose. Indeed, it is comically absurd to think of God having this sort of anxiety, but we can well understand how a limited (self-conscious) being might want to transcend his or her own limits" (*The Human Predicament*, 54).

[37] "Philosophy and the Meaning of Life", 81.

are ways of obtaining meaning by transcending the temporal limits of our life, without becoming literally immortal.

Similar remarks apply to the argument that only an immortal life would be meaningful because meaning in life requires doing something of ultimate consequence by making a permanent difference to the world. As Michael Levine points out, a being whose existence is not permanent might nonetheless make a permanent difference by having a lasting impact on something else which is eternal.[38] Immortality, consequently, would not be necessary for meaning in life, strictly speaking, even if we grant this assumption about the latter. Certainly, it may then seem fitting to regret the absence of meaning in one's life which is due to the combined absence of the permanence of one's person and of any other entity upon which one could act. But the view that one must make a permanent difference for one's life to be meaningful deserves to be questioned. A standard criticism of this view centres on the observation that many acts in life which make no lasting impression on the world nevertheless *have meaning* in the sense of having purpose, significance or importance—at least to *some* degree. This appears to be the case concerning the actions to which William Lane Craig appeals—the scientist's contributions to knowledge, the doctor's efforts to alleviate suffering, the diplomat's promotion of peace, and so on—which are worth doing even though their significance is limited. While these actions clearly enable a person's life to *have meaning*, it may perhaps be less clear that these make a person's life *meaningful*—that is, confer on her life the special prudential value under consideration here. But if a life *is meaningful* insofar as it *has meaning*, then there would be some reason to believe that a life can be at least partially meaningful despite its impermanence.

[38] Michael Levine, "What does Death have to do with the Meaning of Life?", *Religious Studies* 23/4 (1987) 462.

More generally, it is worth noticing that there are different degrees to which one can transcend the limits of finite existence and approximate making a permanent difference to the world, just as there are different degrees to which the sort of justice which concerned the author of *Ecclesiastes* can be realized and to which moral perfection can be approximated. Accordingly, one way to defend the immortality requirement for life's meaningfulness, Metz points out, is to argue that it is necessary for one's life to be meaningful that one realizes justice, performs actions of lasting significance and transcends one's limits *to the greatest conceivable extent*.[39] But it seems far more plausible to regard one's life as meaningful *to the extent* that one approximates these insuperable limits of engagement with objects of value than to accept that one's life is *utterly meaningless* in the absence of these conditions. However, if that is the case, then it would also be more plausible to think that a mortal life could be at least *pro tanto* meaningful despite of its lack of supreme moral goods, its failure to produce unending consequences and its limitedness in time.

Does this mean there is nothing concerning the meaningfulness of a mortal which is regrettable? Not exactly. After all, if meaning in life is understood, like other prudential goods such as pleasure and desire-satisfaction, to be something found in the parts of a life as well as life as the whole, then it would seem that an infinitely long life has the potential to be indefinitely more meaningful on balance than a finite life, just as an infinitely long life has the potential to be indefinitely more pleasurable on balance than a finite life. Though there may not be any sources of meaning in life which are available *only* to immortals, it looks as though immortality allows for the possibility of an incomparably more meaningful existence than the sort of mortal condition we possess typically affords us. But many philosophers have argued it would be a mistake to believe this, contending that immortality

[39] See *Meaning in Life*, 132–3.

would necessarily be lacking in meaningfulness or other goods available in a mortal life—indeed, sufficiently so to render immortality altogether undesirable. I now proceed to arguments relevant to this conclusion.

5.5 Is immortality undesirable?

In what follows, I consider the arguments that immortality would not be worth choosing because it would be lacking in urgency, narrative excellence and important moral goods, as well as Williams' argument that immortality would inevitably become boring. In each case, arguments along these lines have been presented for the conclusion that immortality would necessarily be *meaningless*, but in each case the success of these arguments, construed in this way, seems dubitable for similar reasons. Some of those responding to Williams, for example, have raised concerns about his suggestion that the tedium of immortality would be sufficient to render an immortal life meaningless, given that many actions in life which are boring nonetheless have meaning and so seem to make one's life more meaningful. David Benatar offers an example: [R]repeatedly performing safety checks on airplanes may be boring," he writes, "but it certainly is not meaningless (from relevant human perspectives)".[40] Likewise, Metz proposes that someone who "volunteered to be bored stiff so that others would not be bored stiff" would thereby confer some meaning on her life.[41] In the same vein, one might wonder why a life which was lacking urgency, narrative excellence or moral goods should necessarily be meaningless. That is, one might wonder why meaning in life cannot be obtained from other sources.

More generally, it might be objected that even if an immortal life is shown to be lacking in meaningfulness or—supposing

[40] *The Human Predicament*, 158.
[41] *Meaning in Life*, 135.

these absences did not render immortal life meaningless—lacking in urgency, narrative excellence or moral goods, it remains to be shown that these disadvantages of immortality are sufficient to make it, on balance, worth rejecting in favour of mortality. Why should the advantages of immortality not be enough to outweigh these disadvantages? One possibility is that while the absence of each of these desiderata on its own provides only *pro tanto* reason to regard immortality as undesirable, the absence of all three together—or together with the presence of profound boredom, as per Williams' argument—generates a compelling cumulative case against immortality's being choiceworthy. Perhaps then, immortality would not be choiceworthy if not merely some but *all* the arguments below identify genuine, intractable problems for immortality. I argue, however, that none of them identify genuine or intractable problems for immortality.

5.5.1 Immortality as lacking urgency

One of the most common arguments against the desirability of immortality proceeds from the claim that immortality would be lacking in meaningful and worthwhile activities and achievements because it would lack a sense of urgency to pursue these things. "If we were immortal", Viktor Frankl writes, "we could legitimately postpone every action forever. It would be of no consequence whether or not we did a thing *now*."[42] But the trouble is that such a deferral would be endlessly repeated, the argument goes, with the result that one ends up doing nothing of importance.

Julian Young interprets Martin Heidegger as arguing, in the same vein, that "an immortal life would be a life without meaning" because "there could be no choices that matter" if "all life-

[42] Viktor Frankl, *The Doctor and the Soul*, Winston, Richard & Clara Winston (tr.) (New York, NY: Vintage, 1986) 64. Emphasis added.

possibilities can be realized over an infinite time".[43] In a mortal life, by contrast, the opposite is the case, according to this argument, since one has only a limited time to engage in meaningful activities. On Heidegger's view, in Young's words,

> [T]o be properly aware of your finitude […] is to realise that *you do not have time* to explore all the multiplicity of options which life places before you. What one is compelled to do, therefore, is to determine which life options are the important, "essential" ones and which are the trivial distractions, the, as Heidegger calls them, "accidental" time-wasters which life thrusts one's way. […] To be able to make distinctions between essential and irrelevant life options one must, Heidegger says, grasp one's life as a "totality", as a "whole" […] But to do that one must […] "anticipate" one's death, "run forward", in imagination, to life's end. […] If, then, one "anticipates" one's death, one grasps one's life as a simplified whole and sees which options are essential and which are trivial distractions.[44]

In short, on this view, there is reason to worry about wasting time in a mortal life which would be absent in an immortal life. The upshot of this, according to these critics of immortality, is that the immortal would never be motivated to do anything meaningful with her life.

There are a pair of limitations to this argument which are worth noticing immediately. Firstly, the argument applies at most only to the situation of someone with *absolute immortality*, for whom death is impossible, rather someone with *immortability*, for whom death is possible but not inevitable.[45] The life of someone who has immortability could be finite. As such, it would still be true that someone with immortability has reason to worry about wasting her life through continual procrastination of

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[43] Julian Young, *The Death of God and the Meaning of Life*, 2nd edition (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014) 146.
[44] *Ibid.*, 145.
[45] A similar observation is made in John Martin Fischer & Benjamin Mitchell-Yellin, "Immortality and Boredom", *The Journal of Ethics* 18/4 (2014) 364.

meaningful activities, even supposing there is only reason to worry about wasting one's life when it might be ended before its mark has been left. After all, she still faces the threat of death frustrating her efforts to confer meaning on her life.

Secondly, this argument does not, strictly speaking, raise a concern about immortality itself but rather about the *knowledge* that one is immortal.[46] The contention from which Heidegger and company proceed is that without the threat of death curtailing one's meaningful projects, or preventing them from before the start, one could not have reason to take up such projects instead of endlessly deferring them. The problem is, in other words, a matter of being motivated to achieve something of significance. However, it is compatible with this to suppose that an immortal could be properly motivated to pursue worthwhile ends if she believed she were mortal. The argument applies to the situation of the immortal, therefore, only insofar as she is aware of her condition.[47]

However, and more importantly, the view that one could have reason to avoid wasting one's life *only if* one's life were finite is implausible. Frances Kamm makes this point by contrasting two views of what it means to waste one's life[48]: On the first view, which Kamm calls the "product" view of waste, what matters is that one eventually produces a fixed amount of good through one's action, regardless of how many opportunities for doing so are squandered along the way. An opposing view, referred to as the "resource" view of waste, asserts that a life is wasted just

[46] Metz, *Meaning in Life*, 136.

[47] Here and in other places where I make this point, I mean only to highlight that the arguments under discussion do not establish the conclusion their authors intend them to establish—that immortality is *necessarily* undesirable. Certainly, it might be unrealistic to suppose that an immortal would not come to believe she is immortal, and it might be at least *pro tanto* more desirable to be aware of one's immortality than ignorant of it.

[48] "Rescuing Ivan Ilych", 9.

insofar as the opportunities for doing something worthwhile which arise are not utilized. But, Kamm is right to highlight that

> neither the "product" nor the "resource" view of waste is completely adequate. This is because it is important how we live each moment—not just that we produce a fixed product. Nor is it true that if we waste a moment of time of which we are to have an infinite number, its loss as a resource is what matters. What is important is that we should have been *living* differently at that point in time. It is important how we live each moment because it is important *that we respond correctly*, all the time, to the value and disvalue of persons, things, and events that surround us and are in us.[49]

To endlessly defer doing anything meaningful or worthwhile—with the consequence that one does nothing of importance ever—is irrational, in other words, precisely because the actions which are procrastinated would be meaningful and worth doing *now*. To continually display a preference for inaction or for actions which are not meaningful and not worthwhile over ones available to us which are such would be irrational. If we, or our immortal counterparts, really possessed the inclination to behave in this way, this would *itself* seem to be something regrettable; it would constitute a failure to respond correctly to the value of those things which we neglect by behaving so. That is to say, because there *is* reason to avoid wasting one's life by doing something meaningful with it even if it were infinite, then if we were nonetheless incapable of being motivated to do such things were we made immortal, this would simply mean that we are, regrettably, not responsive to reason. In that were case, the problem would reside not with immortality itself but with a feature of our psychology which is by no means essential or unchangable.

[49] "Rescuing Ivan Ilych", 9.

It is not entirely clear to what extent these criticisms apply to Samuel Scheffler's argument that immortality would not be worth choosing because, without temporal scarcity, there could be no *valuing* as such.[50] Scheffler's expression of this idea is—while suggestive—unfortunately vague. One interpretation of Scheffler's view is that if there were no temporal constraints concerning whether and when certain actions and things were available to us, then we would not *consider* these to have any value. He writes, for instance, that without the "limits of time" to impose constraints upon our decision-making, "force upon us the need to establish priorities [and] guide our lives under a conception of which things are worth doing and caring about and choosing", "it is at best unclear how far we would be *guided* by ideas of value at all".[51] But this seems to raise the same worry that insofar as this is true, its truth is due to a regrettable feature of our psychology; namely, an inability to *recognize* objects of value for what they are.

Alternatively, another reading of Scheffler's remarks takes him to be arguing that actions and things *themselves* would not have value if their availability were not limited in time. This reading is suggested by his claim that "the aspects of life that we cherish most dearly—love and labour, intimacy and achievement, creativity and humour and solidarity and all the rest—all have the status of *values* for us because of their role in our finite and bounded lives".[52] But, on this reading, Scheffler's view is not only lacking in motivation but enigmatic; it is far from obvious why the value of things should be diminished insofar as *our* access to them in time is not limited. His examples here do nothing to remedy this enigma. Indeed, these seem equally inexplicable—why should the value of an artist's creative work, of a comedian's

[50] *Death and the Afterlife*, 99–100.
[51] *Ibid.*, 99. Emphasis added.
[52] *Ibid.*, 100.

joke or of a group's solidarity be diminished if placed in the context of eternity? Scheffler has not provided any reasons to believe that these should be any less valuable.

More recently, David Belgin has argued that the *significance* of our engagement with projects, persons and other objects of value would become "diluted" if we lived forever, because we would not face the same kinds of choices between incompatible commitments, some of which must be sacrificed or forgone for the sake of others.[53] However, this argument is liable to another criticism which confronts both Scheffler's argument and the argument taken from Frankl and Heidegger. Specifically, that even in an eternal life, there would still be temporal constraints concerning whether and when certain actions and things of value were available to us. Indeed, Scheffler concedes that such constraints would exist concerning our interactions with perishing objects, such as changing landscapes, and non-repeating events, such as moments of historical importance.[54] But we should add, as Niko Kolodny does in his commentary on Scheffler's work, that attaining certain goods in life often depends crucially on timing, either because of their very nature—one has to be the first to be the one who invents or discovers something, to use Kolodny's example—or because of external factors—as when particular goods are scarce and must be fought over or when circumstances limit the time they are available to us.[55]

What this means, however, is that we *cannot* always defer doing certain meaningful and worthwhile things ceaselessly and so sometimes *must* face choices between incompatible commitments. It is possible that we would face these sorts of decisions *less often* in an immortal life than a mortal one, admittedly—but if so, then this is surely an advantage of immortality over mortality instead of a disadvantage. "[W]hile it would be bad if one

[53] "Should I Choose Never to Die?", 2019–21.
[54] *Death and the Afterlife*, 99 n. 5.
[55] "That I Should Die and Others Live", 167–8.

were to lose the opportunity to choose between two good things," Jeff McMahan writes, "because one of them becomes unobtainable, or because both become unobtainable, it is seldom a misfortune to lose the opportunity to choose between two goods because one can have both."[56] As such, having fewer of such choices would not seem to be something that counts against immortality.

5.5.2 Immortality as lacking narrative excellence

Another complaint made against immortality is based on a view familiar from the second chapter. This is the view that the overall value of one's life does not depend merely on the amount of momentary goods and momentary bads in that life but also on its global properties—those which concern the relations that obtain between its parts. On this view, whether a life is worthwhile, all things considered, is at least partially a matter of how the different parts of that life relate with one another or, in other words, whether this life's narrative structure contains patterns which confer value on the whole.[57] The present complaint against immortality is that it lacks narrative excellence of this kind.

In this vein, Geoffrey Scarre argues that an immortal life would be one that "lacked any meaningful shape or pattern" because the "arch-shaped structure of birth, growth, maturity, decline and death" would be absent from it.[58] He adds that it would "be a life that was going nowhere specific", like "an infinite river that meandered eternally without ever reaching the sea".[59] Similarly, Scheffler asserts that understanding our lives as

[56] *The Ethics of* Killing, 100.
[57] See section *2.3.3.1.*
[58] *Death*, 58–9.
[59] *Ibid.*

progressing through a series of stages—such as those of childhood, adolescence and adulthood—is a condition of the achievements and satisfactions indexed to each stage counting as such. But, he continues, this aspect of what we value about our lives would be unavailable to the immortal insofar as a life which never ended would lack this kind of trajectory.[60] Scheffler's view is, it seems, not that an infinite life would be completely shapeless in the way Scarre argues it would be, but that it would nevertheless lack a specific pattern which is important to the goodness of our lives.

Neither Scarre nor Scheffler have identified global or narrative features of mortal lives which could not be found in an immortal life, however. Despite lacking the "arch-shaped structure of birth, growth, maturity, decline and death" which concerns the former, an unending life could still have a narrative shape determined by the relations of its different parts. It could feature high times and lows times, times of stability and times of tumultuous change, and each of these back and forth, as well as significant periods of striving, stagnation and frustration which culminate in achievement, advancement and satisfaction, and so on. It could, in short, still have a shape despite not having a shape which culminates in decline and death.

In a similar manner, an infinite life could include progress through discrete stages, with the possibility of distinctive achievements and satisfactions associated with each. This is because what is necessary for understanding a life to involve such progress is simply that there are finite periods within it which constitute internally cohesive unities—characterised by certain similarities in one's circumstances, dispositions, preferences, or goals, for example—and which relate in some manner to such finite periods before and after it. Indeed, an immortal might understand her life to include multiple levels of such stages; she

[60] *Death and the Afterlife*, 96.

may regard each millennium of her life as having its own characteristic traits while also regarding each century and each decade within it in the same way. In fact, Scheffler concedes that specific achievements and satisfactions being indexed to specific stages of one's life depends in part on "on the physical, mental, and social capacities of a human being at that stage", such that "changes in the circumstances of human life may actually result in the emergence of new stages".[61] But, given these concessions, it is not clear why the point should not apply to immortality too.

Some have argued that an immortal life would lack narrative excellence because it would involve repeating certain events over and over through the course of an infinite timespan.[62] This idea is gracefully expressed by the narrator of Jorge Luis Borges' short story "The Immortal", who says about the immortal troglodytes he has met:

> Among the Immortals […] every act (every thought) is the echo of others that preceded it in the past, with no visible beginning, and the faithful presage of others that will repeat it in the future, *ad vertiginem*. There is nothing that is not as though lost between indefatigable mirrors. Nothing can occur but once.[63]

While there is also much repetition in our own mortal lives, these critics of immortality have highlighted something which we should expect to find much more of in a life which never ends. However, they exaggerate not only the extent to which repetition must be found in an infinite life but also its significance. The narrator of "The Immortals", to begin with, overstates the case against immortality when he says that *nothing* in an infinite life could avoid repetition. Part of the problem underlying this is

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[61] *Death and the Afterlife*, 96.
[62] See May, *Death*, 46–7, and Aaron Smuts, "Immortality and Significance", *Philosophy and Literature* 35/1 (2011) 142–4.
[63] Jorge Luis Brges, "The Immortal", repr. in *The Aleph and Other Stories*, Hurley, Andrew (tr.) (New York, NY: Penguin, 2000) 15.

that whether one event counts as another iteration of some type of event one has experienced before depends on how one describes this type of event; the more specific those descriptions, the smaller the amount of repetition which will be counted. More importantly, these critics of immortality appeal to an implausible view in suggesting that it is the repetition of activities and events itself, as a narrative feature of one's life, rather than its negative effects on experience which accounts for its undesirability. The life of someone who dies at twenty is likely to contain less repetition than the life of someone who lives to be a hundred, but few of us would end our lives early to avoid such a fate. And, despite having brushed one's teeth morning and evening, slept and eaten every day, and exhaled and inhaled millions of times a year, none of us consider the fact that it would involve repetition of these activities as reason to think doing them again is contrary to one's interests.

5.5.3 Immortality as lacking moral goods

A third argument for the conclusion that immortality would not be choiceworthy identifies the problem with immortality as a lack of important moral goods in the immortal's life. Rather boldly, Nussbaum has argued that several virtues would be impossible for immortals—though, as I notice below, she has since repudiated her own argument. Immortals could not have the virtue of courage, she previously argued, "[f]or courage consists in a certain way of acting and reacting in the face of death and the risk of death"; nor could they have reason for moderation, since this requires "an awareness of the limits and needs of the human body that will be absent, as such, from a being who can never die"; nor, lastly, could justice or generosity figure as significantly

as in our world of mere mortals in a world of beings whose survival does depend on the allocation of resources.[64]

Just as boldly, Ward E. Jones argues that our mortality is a necessary condition of our preciousness, as well as our lovability—which is "the clearest manifestation of our preciousness".[65] According to Jones' understands the concept, our preciousness is "a kind of unconditional value which human beings possess", and which "is the ground of our entitlement to respect, justice, and fair treatment, and of our capacity for being cared for".[66] A being is lovable, Jones implicitly asserts, if and only if it is precious in this sense. The problem, however, is that an immortal being is not lovable, or so Jones argues; because loving someone is constituted centrally by being concerned for her well-being, and because our vulnerability to death is responsible for our profound vulnerability to harm, it is thus what accounts for our being lovable. As such, "it is not possible to feel the kind of love we feel for each other, and the kind of concern that love embodies, for an immortal creature [...] that is truly invulnerable to premature or inevitable death".[67] An immortal is, consequently, neither lovable nor precious.

This line of argument suffers from similar limitations as the argument that immortality would be lacking urgency. Like the latter, the argument concerning a lack of moral goods—as it is

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[64] *The Therapy of Desire*, 227–8. Justice is, arguably, not a virtue concept, but I set this issue aside to engage Nussbaum according to her own views on the matter.

[65] Ward E. Jones, "Venerating Death", *Philosophical Papers* 44/1 (2013) 70.

[66] "Venerating Death", 69, 74. Jones does not explicitly take notice of a result which his remarks seem to imply; namely, that one could have no moral duties toward an immortal being. This follows if mortality is a necessary condition of preciousness and preciousness the ground of one's moral status as a being toward whom certain kinds of treatment are permissible and impermissible. This constitutes, on my view, a *reductio ad absurdum* of Jones' proposal. However, I do not focus on this problem for his argument at length here, given that this conclusion is not explicitly endorsed.

[67] "Venerating Death", 72.

made by Nussbaum and Jones—applies at most to *absolute immortality* and not to *immortability*. Again, because someone with immortability can die, though death is not an inescapable fate for her, she remains vulnerable to death and therefore—according to the logic of these arguments—can deserve to be loved and can show courage in the face of death and moderation in satisfying her appetites within the limits of her body's needs. It is also worth noting that Nussbaum's remarks about the absence of justice and generosity are directed toward a world in which everyone is imagined to be immortal, when I have suggested we consider immortality as something which is strictly optional, allowing for the possibility that some might have chosen to remain mortal.

The arguments offered by Nussbaum and Jones might also appear to target merely the *knowledge* that one is immortal rather than one's immortality itself.[68] This seems to be an accurate assessment of Jones' argument, insofar as he wants to assert that one could not love or be loved in a community of immortals. His contention is that there one could not love an immortal being, knowing them to be immortal. But it is compatible with this argument that one might love an immortal, supposing one believed them to be mortal. By contrast, Nussbaum's point is not simply that we could not be motivated to cultivate the virtues of courage, moderation, justice and generosity. Rather, her point is that there would be no value involved in doing so—that dispositions to act courageously and so on would not be genuine virtues for an immortal. Of course, we need not imagine an immortal life to be lacking in virtue altogether; there could be other character traits which would count as virtues in an immortal life. Having the strength of will to overcome procrastination, perhaps, would be especially valuable for an immortal. But, in fact, Nussbaum

[68] Metz offers this criticism of Nussbaum's argument; see his *Meaning in Life*, 136.

concedes this, aiming instead to demonstrate "the extent to which *our* values would be absent in [an immortal] life".[69] Underlying her argument is the idea that an immortal life could fail to be choiceworthy by lacking moral goods to which we *currently* attach importance, despite containing goods to which we *would* attach importance as immortals.

There are, however, more important problems with Jones' and Nussbaum's arguments. Part of the mistake both make is to assume that all kinds of immortality must be like that of the Homeric gods who feature throughout the latter's discussion, involving not only invulnerability to death but invulnerability *simpliciter*.[70] In reply to Jones' argument, it need merely be noted that although being mortal is a sufficient condition for being vulnerable to harm, it is emphatically not a necessary condition. As such, even if vulnerability to harm is a necessary condition of being lovable, and one is precious just insofar as one is lovable, an immortal might nonetheless be both loveable and precious because vulnerable to harm.[71] Indeed, if one's beloved possessed *absolute immortality*, there may be much more for one to be concerned about for her sake; she faces the risk of unending misfortune.

Likewise, Nussbaum's argument proceeds from requirements for the relevant virtues which are too demanding, but when the requirements of these virtues are construed more plausibly, we see that these could feature as virtues in the lives of immortals.

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[69] *The Therapy of Desire*, 229.

[70] See Overall, *Aging, Death, and Human Longevity*, 150, and Nussbaum, "The Damage of Death", 36.

[71] Jones explains his contrary position by arguing that the immortal's invulnerability would result from her eventual loss of all desire for pleasure and achievement; see "Venerating Death", 74–5. He defends his view, in other words, based on one reading of Williams' argument, according to which "habitual" boredom is inevitable for the immortal. It is far from clear to me why lacking desires should entail that one cannot be harmed! Nevertheless, I neglect to discuss this claim in detail here, since later in this chapter I reject Williams' argument that immortality would entail an eventual loss of all desire.

For moderation of the sort she has in mind to be a virtue, it simply needs to be the case that one would cause oneself harm by overreaching the limits of one's bodily needs, not that one would confront the threat of death if one over-satisfies one's appetites. Similarly, for justice and generosity to be virtues, what is needed is simply for the resources necessary to sustain a *worthwhile* life to be scarce, not for there to be a scarcity of the resources necessary for *mere survival*. Finally, it is implausible to limit courage to a virtue demonstrated in striving for an ideal in the face of death only rather than in the face of adversity or peril more generally. An immortal could clearly face sufficient risk of harm for courage to remain a virtue for her. In fact, Andrew Stark argues that there is a paradox involved in asserting that courage is impossible for immortals *and* accepting that courage, centrally, involves sacrificing or risking the sacrifice of one's life for something of greater value: "[F]or this necessarily assumes that we […] are capable of valuing many things more highly than life itself. And so whatever loss death inflicts, there remain other things whose loss would, depending on the circumstances, require even greater courage to sustain."[72] In her later work, Nussbaum concedes that "[o]ne can imagine an immortal being struggling against all sorts of limits: pain, weakness, the bad conduct of others, poverty, injustice, athletic injury, and so forth", which "are limit enough to give the virtues their point".[73]

5.5.4 The tedium of immortality

Finally, there is Williams' argument that considerations about the tedium of immortality constitute sufficient reason to reject all forms of immortality available to us—an argument which has been the subject of more critical attention than any of the other

[72] Andrew Stark, *The Consolations of Mortality: Making Sense of Death* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016) 245 n. 32.
[73] "The Damage of Death", 37.

arguments discussed yet. Williams, it was noted at the beginning of this chapter, presents his argument in the form of a dilemma. According to him, an immortal life cannot simultaneously satisfy two conditions necessary for it to be choiceworthy for a person; firstly, that it must involve the continuity of this same person through time and, secondly, that it must be an attractive existence.[74]

He argues, on the one hand, that given the repetition of experience the immortal faces, an immortal existence could only escape becoming unbearably boring—that is, escape being unattractive—if one's character were to continually undergo significant changes in terms of one's preferences, goals, dispositions and so on. Through such changes one would become capable not only of being absorbed in a greater diversity of activities at different times but also of finding the repetition which must be endured more endurable. However, on the other hand, the problem is that such significant changes to one's character would imply that it is not the same person who persists indefinitely through time, so that the future states of the far-distant-in-time immortal could not be ones which the individual choosing immortality has self-interested reason to want. Immortality would, in sum, either not be worth choosing because boring or not worth choosing because not genuine immortality.[75]

In the next section of this chapter, I consider Williams' argument that continuity of identity is undermined by self-transformation. For now, I attend to his argument concerning the

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[74] This is the structure given to Williams' argument in John Martin Fischer, "Why Immortality is Not So Bad", repr. *Life, Death, & Meaning: Key Philosophical Readings on the Big Questions*, Benatar, David (ed.) (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004) 350.

[75] In making this argument, Williams appeals to the fictional story of Elina Makropulos, a woman in her third century of life, who has been cycling through various aliases with the same initials since her forties when she decides to stop taking the elixir of immortality—as told in Leoš Janáček's opera *The Makropulos Case*, based on Karel Čapek's play of the same name.

eternal life of someone whose character remains relatively constant. There are, notably, three central steps to this latter argument. The first involves an inference from the relative constancy of this person's character—her preferences, goals, dispositions, and so on—to the claim that immortality would unavoidably involve significant and endless repetition for such a person; the second step makes an inference from the unavoidability of significant repetition to the claim that immortality would inevitably become boring for this person; and the third step is the inference from the inevitability of boredom to the conclusion that an immortal life would not be worth choosing.[76] I have already offered some remarks on the extent of repetition which is unavoidable in an immortal life above and so I focus here on the second pair of inferences.

One worry for Williams about the third step of this argument is that regardless of whether immortality must involve periods of boredom, it may nevertheless be worth choosing over mortality. After all, in our own mortal lives, some amount of boredom—in the colloquial sense of the term—is also inevitable in the course of living a full life, given our psychological tendencies. But in both a mortal and immortal life which contains boredom, in this sense, there might be sufficient goods to offset or compensate for this bad. As such, if the inevitability of boredom is to constitute a specific problem for immortality, it must be because the amount of boredom which is inevitable in the immortal life is, unlike that in an ordinary mortal life, *necessarily out of proportion* with the goods present in that life. That is, Williams'

[76] It is worth noticing, as Scheffler does, that since the tedium of immortality, according to Williams' view, arises due to backward-lacking looking rather than forward-looking features of the immortal's life—from the fact that she *has* endured relentless repetition—that it is no solution to the problem to have a mortal but extraordinarily long life; this would eventually lead to the same condition (*Death and the Afterlife*, 90–2). Consequently, if Williams' argument is successful, it seems we should be glad not only to have finite lives but also to have lives which are as brief as ours tend to be.

might avoid this problem if the conclusion merited by his arguments is not merely that immortality must involve periods of boredom but that it must involve unending and unbearable boredom.

What becomes evident once one begins to think further about Williams' argument is how vital it is to assessing both his inference from the unavoidability of repetition in eternal life to the inevitability of boredom and from the latter to the conclusion that immortality is not worth choosing that one get a clear grasp of what he means in talking about boredom—something which he unfortunately does not supply. For example, should boredom be understood as a positive state—as the presence of an unconditionally bad state of affairs—or as a negative state—the absence of something desirable, such as excitement—or both? The inference to Williams' final conclusion seems strongest if the boredom which the immortal must confront includes both the presence of something bad and the absence of goods.

In one of the few critical responses to Williams which examine the psychological literature on boredom, Lisa Bortolotti and Yujin Nagasawa differentiate between "situational" boredom—which involves being in a state of "relatively low arousal" in response to an "inadequately simulating situation"—and "habitual" boredom—which "is manifested in personal dissatisfaction and lack of involvement and [..] signals low interest in one's present and future life".[77] While situational boredom involves being bored with something specific, either because one never had any interest in it or because one has lost one's interest in it, habitual boredom does not involve being bored with something specific but with "life in general".[78] More simply, situational boredom, one might say, arises from a lack of interest in one's present circumstances, while habitual boredom involves a lack

[77] Lisa Bortolotti & Yujin Nagasawa, "Immortality without Boredom", *Ratio* 12/3 (2009) 268.
[78] *Ibid.*, 268.

of interest in anything at all. Jeremy Wisnewski interprets Williams' argument as concerned with habitual boredom, which he describes, using the latter's jargon, as "the inability to see things as worth pursuing—an inability that arises from not having categorical desires"—that is, desires whose satisfaction requires continued life.[79]

Williams' argument is, of course, that immortality must become boring for someone of a stable character *because* it would involve repetition of the same activities and experiences. But Bortolotti and Nagasawa point out that Williams' claim fails to cohere with the available empirical evidence if interpreted as concerning *habitual* rather than situational boredom.[80] Research regarding boredom, they explain, suggests that occurrences of habitual boredom depend largely upon the psychological traits and processes of the individual and not upon the poverty of diversity and stimulation in her enviroment, as is the case for occurrences of situational boredom. There is, in other words, a lack of empirical evidence for the claim that habitual boredom—a stultifying lack of desire—would follow from the repetition of activities and experiences. And it is certainly not inconceivable that such a desire-less state could be avoided. Rather, as Grace Jantzen writes, given that "even in this [mortal] life, one enterprise leads to another", in an immortal life "we might pursue an endless series of challenging and absorbing tasks, each one developing into another, without risk of boredom".[81]

Do we have any reason to think that an immortal life would *necessarily* contain enough *situational* boredom to outweigh the goods it brings? There are, in fact, at least three reasons to think this is *not* the case. First, as John Martin Fischer argues, while

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[79] J. Jeremy Wisnewski, "Is the Immortal Life Worth Living?", *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 58/1 (2005) 33.
[80] "Immortality without Boredom", 269–73.
[81] Grace Jantzen, "Do We Need Immortality?", *Language, Metaphysics, and Death*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Forham University Press, 1994) 267.

there are some experiences which are "self-exhausting"—which we would not want to repeat—there are a sufficient variety of "repeatable" experiences to allow an immortal to avoid becoming bored.[82] Among such repeatable experiences, Fischer includes "the pleasures of sex, of eating fine meals and drinking fine wines, of listening to beautiful music, of seeing great art, and so forth"[83] as well as the joys of friendship and loving relationships.[84] Secondly, and relatedly, while an immortal life might inevitably involve repetition, it need not involve monotony; if the repetition of similar events in an infinite life were sufficiently well-distributed across time, with dissimilar events taking place between these, then there would likely be great enough variety to mitigate against the possible negative effects of repetition. As Nussbaum writes in her later work:

> [T]here are so many interesting and useful things one can do in the world that immortality is about the only condition that would give one enough time to do many of them and still have some time for recreation. Consider the stressed-out lives that so many Americans have, lives that don't permit enough time to be devoted to each valuable pursuit, and that certainly don't allow much time to do many essentially frivolous things that make life more fun. If people weren't always racing against the clock, they would probably find more meaning in each thing rather than less, and they would get more sleep and in general feel good more of the time.[85]

Finally, it is by now standard to notice that the immortal also has the opportunity to engage endlessly in projects which are open-ended in the sense that they might never be completely finalized and thus never repeated, such as the pursuit of moral perfection, the pursuit of beauty artistic creation, the promotion

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[82] "Why Immortality is Not So Bad", 355–8.
[83] *Ibid.*, 356.
[84] Fischer & Mitchell-Yellin, "Immortality and Boredom", 359–60.
[85] "The Damage of Death", 40.

of justice, the discovery of truth, and so on.[86] It is tempting to add that since an immortal would have an eternity to solve the problem of boredom, it would be worth choosing to be immortal merely in the absence of *a priori* reason to think this problem cannot be solved—especially if it were open to the immortal to opt out of immortality if she fails to do so.

Some people are, clearly, more prone to boredom of either variety than others. For them, avoiding boredom in an infinite existence might require cultivating alternative preferences, goals and dispositions or, put differently, altering some features of their character. Perhaps then these individuals would find themselves facing a dilemma analogous to Williams' (though I argue not in the next section). But even if this were so, it would not be the case that genuine immortality would *necessarily* be so boring as to make it worth rejecting for everyone.

In arguing for this conclusion, Williams acknowledges that the problem of boredom arises for immortal life only if certain facts about humans are held fixed, particularly facts about our psychological dispositions. In other words, he concedes that the cogency of his objection to immortality relies on "pictur[ing] living forever as living as an embodied person *in the world as it is*".[87] Given this, though, it may simply be what one should regret is one's mortality *together with* these facts about the world—specifically, together with the presence of those psychological dispositions which make us liable to boredom. If the problem with immortality is that it would eventually drive us to unbearable boredom, given our psychological tendencies, then a choiceworthy immortality would be one in which we had different psychological tendencies.[88] To imagine this sort of

[86] See, for example, Fischer & Mitchell-Yellin, "Immortality and Boredom", 360; Jantzen, "Do We Need Immortality", 270; and Levy, "Downshifting and Meaning in Life", 184–5.
[87] "The Makropulos Case", 338. Emphasis added.
[88] As noticed in Benatar, *The Human Predicament*, 154–5; and Overall, *Aging, Death, and Human Longevity*, 145.

immortality might be to imagine something quite far-fetched, but it would not be more far-fetched than imagining facts about our physiology to be altered so that aging is eliminated. As such, Williams' argument, if successful, would merely show that choiceworthy forms of immortality require, as we have already seen, that fundamental features of our actual mortal lives be changed. But the argument is, as I have tried to show, not successful.

5.6 Surviving immortality

In the epigraph this chapter, Thomas Nagel offers what he describes to as a "version of mathematical induction" which support of the desirability of immortality; because he could at every five-minute interval within an infinite timespan rationally choose to live another five minutes, he infers that an infinitely-long life would be worth choosing for himself. Similar arguments are found elsewhere in discussions of immortality. Timothy Chappell, for example, argues that a life of *eudaimonia* is worth continuing forever because at every moment in a life that is *eudaimon* there are projects and plans extending into the future whose completion death would prevent, such that death would never fail to be a misfortune worth avoiding.[89] Williams, notably, introduces his inquiry into the desirability of immortality by noticing a similar line of reasoning; namely, that "it is not only always better to live [further], but better to live always, that is, never to die".[90]

The first part of William's argument, critically evaluated above, denies—because of the inescapability of boredom—that those who maintain a constant character throughout their immortal lives will always be able to rationally choose to live

[89] Timothy Chappell, "Infinity Goes up on Trial: Must Immortality be Meaningless?", *European Journal of Philosophy* 14/1 (2007) 35–7.
[90] "The Makropulos Case", 337.

further at each finite interval of their infinite lives. The second part of Williams' argument—though he does not present it as such—casts as a *non sequitur* the argument that if it is worth choosing to live another five minutes at every five-minute internal within an endless life then it is worth choosing to life eternally.[91] This is because, according to Williams, the only way to ensure that a life is worth continuing at each finite interval in a person's eternal life is to ensure it involves a constant transformation of her character—but, he adds, this would be to undermines one's reasons for regarding it as *her* eternal life in the first place.

But, as nearly each of Williams' commentators points out, his argument concerning a life marked by transformation places too strict a requirement on the continuity of personal identity—one which, importantly, we fail to meet in our ordinary mortal lives.[92] The psychological changes which occur between early childhood and adulthood are at least equal to, if not more drastic than, those changes which the immortal whose character is subject to transformation undergoes, since the former involve not merely changes to the individual's preferences, goals, and dispositions but even more fundamental changes to her cognitive capacities. Following Williams' assumption that one's character cannot change while one's personal identity remains the same, it would seem that a young child of, say, less than five years or so could not have self-interested reasons to continue living to adulthood. But this implication of Williams' view is clearly absurd! It constitutes, as Benatar puts it, a "*reductio ad absurdum* of [Williams'] *reductio ad tedium*".[93] Indeed, views according to which personal

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[91] Another way of characterizing William's argument would be as asserting that Nagel's reasoning involves a kind of Sorites Paradox—where apparently compelling reasoning from apparently plausible premises yields a falsehood.

[92] See, for example, Benatar, *The Human* Predicament, 157; Chappell, "Infinity Goes up on Trial", 38; Fischer, "Why Immortality is Not So Bad", 360–1; and Overall, *Aging, Longevity, and Death*, 158–61.

[93] *The Human Predicament*, 157.

identity consists not in the continuity of a particular biological organism but in the continuity of a particular psychological entity typically take such continuity to be ensured as long as there are overlapping chains of psychological connections between a person at different times, even when there are few or no direct connections between the person at far distant points in time. If the transformations to one's character endured in an immortal life are gradual, therefore, there is no reason to assume there will eventually be a radical break in these chains of psychological connections—and thus no reason to assume the immortal will eventually, literally, become someone else.[94]

Similar criticisms apply to Pedro Tabensky's argument that the sense of urgency created by temporal finitude—the fact that we are often forced to choose between incompatible courses of action at risk of abandoning one of these altogether in a finite life—is a necessary condition for the possibility of our forming a unified identity.[95] Although Tabensky acknowledges that there would be "other constraints, related to the particular history of a given immortal, which would motivate him or her to choose specific directions at particular times", he believes that because "the immortal has infinite time at his or her disposal, it seems there will inevitably be *a moment* in which an immortal will be left with no reasons (or, more generally, motivations) for choosing one life option [to pursue in the present] rather than a bewildering array of other possibilities".[96] Tabensky's contention is, in other words, that because the immortal would not *always* be so constrained in her choices that she could only have chosen

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[94] It is conceivable that one eventually become, in the course of an immortal existence, someone whom one wants never to become at the time of choosing to be immortal. Someone like Dr Jekyll could become someone like Mr Hyde. But, *contra* Scarre (*Death*, 58), this does not seem unavoidable.
[95] Pedro Tabensky, *Happiness: Personhood, Community, Purpose* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003) 101–3.
[96] *Ibid.*, 102. Emphasis added.

another life option on pain of forever forgoing the one she does choose, the immortal could not have a reason for her decision to pursue that life option *now*. Without that pressure to clarify her priorities, the immortal's sense of identity, he argues, would be underdeveloped.[97] But the logic of Tabensky's argument would suggest that in mortal life too we often lack a unified identity. There are very frequently moments in an ordinary mortal life like ours in which it is not the case that one could only have chosen another life option on pain of forever forgoing the option one does choose. Sometimes one could have legitimately deferred what one chose to do; the decision of a young and healthy philosopher to work on a paper in metaphysics in the coming weeks and another paper in epistemology in the weeks to follow is unlikely to face a *serious* risk of never coming to do the latter—assuming she is not pursued by assassins! Accordingly, if a lack of unified identity is taken to undermine one's prudential interests in continued existence, then this argument similarly places too strict a requirement on the continuity of identity.[98]

Finally, several critics of immortality ultimately deny it is choiceworthy because, as they argue, an immortal life would not be a *human* life.[99] To be immortal would be, on this view, incompatible either with one's being a member of the species *Homo sapiens* or, more generally, with one's being the kind of being one was before one became immortal. Sometimes, the point such critics of immortality are making is that the appropriate standards for judging the quality of a life must be sensitive to the kind of

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[97] Tabensky writes: "[I]f someone were to become an immortal creature, he or she would lose, or perhaps simply never develop, the sense that his or her life is that of a unitary creature" (*Happiness*, 101).

[98] It is interesting to note in this regard that Tabensky's views resemble some interpretations of Martin Heidegger's views concerning what it means to make decisions with *authenticity*—that is, in ways which are revealing of one's "true" self. Importantly, the concept of authenticity allows for one to fail to make decisions authentically without thereby literally failing to be the same person.

[99] See, for example, Lenman, "Immortality", 327; Overall, *Aging, Longevity, and Death*, 65–73; and Scheffler, *Death and the Afterlife*, 95–100.

life which it is, such that super-human standards of assessment would automatically be inapt for assessing whether an individual human life has gone well or badly. However, the intended conclusion of this chapter does not run afoul of this constraint; to argue that an immortal life could be better than a mortal life—and would therefore sometimes be choiceworthy—*is not* to make a claim about whether that mortal life would be good or bad on balance, or worth living or not. Other times, it is taken to be a definitive objection to the desirability of immortality merely to notice that *prima facie* candidates for choiceworthy ways of being immortal would be different enough physically—and possibly psychologically—from the way things are for us to put into doubt the immortal's status as a human being. Along these lines, John Macquarrie declares that "death and temporal finitude are so much a constitutive part of humanity that an unending human life would be a monstrosity".[100] But then, such a reply to the arguments of this chapter—which insists that we should not desire or choose anything other than the *actual* details of the human condition—begs the question with respect to whether living with fundamentally different conditions would be choiceworthy or desirable. It assumes, without argument, that the answer will always be "No".

Conclusion

Life without the inevitability of death is not a prospect which everyone should feel compelled to reject, even if a life without the possibility of death is not a prospect which everyone should want. An immortal life is not guaranteed to be a blessed life, but immortality does offer the chance of a life which is infinitely better than our finite lives. But, of course, though a desirable form of immortality is conceivable, it is not clear that it is, or ever will

[100] John Macquarrie, *Existentialism: An Introduction, Guide and Assessment* (London: Penguin, 1972) 197.

be, a realistic possibility. The result is, it seems, that there is reason neither to be glad of one's mortality nor to crave immortality to the point of despair and humiliation.

Death casts a shadow over life from which we cannot emerge into the light; when death does not confront us as an evil, that is simply and unfortunately because the nothingness of oblivion is preferable to the evils with which life confronts us. Our situation makes it tempting to seek consolation in some of the views which have been considered and rejected in this dissertation—in the thought that death is nothing to us, since we never meet it in life; that there is something to be done now to ensure that death will not bad for us, whenever it comes; or that we are better off with death than without it. But in each case the consolation turns out to be ill-founded. Responding correctly to the fact that we are going to die requires giving up these false consolations and finding ways to live in the shadow of death.

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