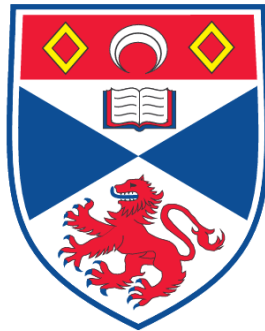


**WHY DEATH CAN BE BAD AND IMMORTALITY IS WORSE**

**Cara Kalnow**

**A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of MPhil  
at the  
University of St. Andrews**



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# **Why Death Can Be Bad and Immortality Is Worse**

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**Masters of Philosophy in Philosophy  
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August 8, 2008**

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the moral implications of the metaphysical nature of death. I begin with the Epicurean arguments which hold that death is morally irrelevant for the one who dies, and that one should regard it accordingly. I defend the Epicurean claim that death *simpliciter* can be neither good nor bad from objections which purport to show that the negative features of death are bad for the one who dies. I establish that existence is a necessary condition for a person's being morally benefited or wronged, and since death is the privation of existence, death cannot be bad for the person who dies. To account for the commonly-held belief that death is an evil, I explain that the prospect of death can be morally relevant to persons while they are alive as death is one of the many states of affairs that may prevent the satisfaction of persons' desires for the goods of life. I claim that categorical desires ground a disutility by which death can rationally be regarded as an evil to be avoided and feared. I then consider an infinite life as a possible attractive alternative to a finite life. I argue that a life which is invulnerable to death cannot be a desirable human existence, as many of our human values are inseparable from the finite temporal structure of life. I conclude that death *simpliciter* can be neither good nor bad, but the fact of death has two moral implications for living persons: death as such is instrumentally good (it is a necessary condition by which the value of life is recognized); and our own individual deaths can rationally be regarded as an evil to be avoided.

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I do not want to die—no; I neither want to die nor do I want to want to die; I want to live forever and ever and ever.

—Miguel de Unamuno

The meaning of life is that it stops.

—Franz Kafka

## Introduction

The true nature of death has been a topic of concern for many religions and philosophies. Generally, we can establish two ways in which the nature of death may be defined: the first holds that death is the permanent end of the only life there is; the second holds that death is not the end, but rather the start of another life. For those who believe the latter, great consolation can be found in the fact of death. This consolation may also be found in the view that death is the termination of life as it can bring an end to great suffering. But most find death, when it is held to be the termination of existence, to be the greatest evil that could befall them.

This thesis explores the metaphysical nature of death, where death is defined as the permanent end of a person's existence, and what moral implications, if any, that nature may have. I begin with a distinction between dying, death, and being dead.<sup>1</sup> Dying is a process. Death is the result of that process; it marks the end of a person's existence and the beginning of a person's non-existence. Being dead is the state of non-existence a person enters into once death has occurred. Oftentimes dying and death are taken as one and the same and perhaps this can explain why so many people fear death. To equate the two is deeply mistaken as dying involves a process wherein a person is alive and continues to exist, while death marks the end of that process; it is a time in which a person no longer exists. Dying can be a horrible process; it can include a great amount of suffering and pain for the person. There is no great mystery as to why dying is regarded as a bad for a person. But it is puzzling to consider why death, or the state of being dead, could be bad for a person as each involves a time when a person no longer exists, and cannot experience anything unpleasant that may result from being dead.

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed distinction of the definition of death and the distinction between dying, death, and being dead see Fischer (1993) 3-8 and Rosenbaum (1986).

It has been famously argued by Epicurus that death, and the state of being dead, can neither be good nor bad for the person who died because that person cannot experience it as such.<sup>2</sup> From this argument, he concludes that there cannot be any value to death, and that death should be regarded with indifference. This thesis addresses the various philosophical positions concerning the value of death, beginning with Epicurus' radical argument. The overall intent is to address the following two questions: what is the value of death and what is the appropriate attitude towards death? In part, I suggest that Epicurus was right; the state of being dead can be neither good nor bad for the person who died. But in assessing the value of death, I also consider what reasons we may have for regarding death as bad or good before it occurs.

In general, the philosophical debate concerning Epicurus' radical conclusion focuses around the question of whether or not death can be bad for the person who died. This is an interesting philosophical question for several reasons as it is a commonly held belief that a person's death is bad for that person,<sup>3</sup> yet it is unclear what kind of evil is involved in the nature of death as it cannot be experienced as an evil. If death is indeed an evil, there are pressing issues concerning *who* is harmed by death and *when* this harm occurs, since one no longer exists once dead. Even if these issues can be resolved, there is an additional puzzle pertaining to why we regard the state of being dead as an evil when we do not regard the equal state of non-existence—the period prior to birth—as an evil. All of these puzzles are generated around the fact that a person no longer exists once dead.

In Chapters One and Two I address these questions pertaining to whether or not death is an evil for the person who dies and how it could be regarded as such despite these pressing issues. In Chapter One, I provide

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<sup>2</sup> Epicurus (1964).

<sup>3</sup> For different accounts of the philosophical position that death, when it is annihilation, is bad for the person who died, see Nagel (1979, 1986), Luper (1987, 2004), Feldman (1991), Pitcher (1984), Fischer (1993, 1994, 2006), and Kaufman (1999). Bernard Williams (1973) also holds that death can be bad, but it would be worse to never die.



the Epicurean arguments against the badness of death, which are grounded on the premise that one no longer exists once dead, and conclude that harms can only befall one if one exists at the time in which the harm occurred. In Chapter Two, I discuss how the anti-Epicureans attempt to solve these puzzles by rejecting Epicurus' conclusions on the grounds that bad can befall one even if one no longer exists. The anti-Epicureans hold that the state of being dead is bad for the person who died because it is a time in which a person is *deprived* of the goods of life. Against the deprivation theorists, I claim that the Epicurean conclusion must hold—the state of being dead cannot be bad for the one who dies—as we cannot account for how and when a person can be harmed when that person no longer exists.

In rejecting the anti-Epicurean position that death is an evil for the one who died, I consider a new question in Chapter Three: are there good reasons to regard the *prospect* of death as bad even though death is not bad when it occurs? In addressing this question, I consider a position that negotiates a middle path between the Epicureans and the anti-Epicureans with the view that death *can* be an evil, but need not be. While the deprivation theorists hold that the state of being dead is bad for the person who dies, this position suggests that it is not the state of being dead, but rather the *termination* of life that is bad for the person who died.<sup>4</sup> It is here that I take into consideration Bernard Williams' suggestion that death prevents the fulfillment of certain desires. I propose that a person could regard the prospect of his death as an evil for him, if his death would prevent the satisfaction of desires. Nonetheless, as the discussion in Chapter Two shows, once death occurs, it cannot be bad for the person who dies because we cannot account for a plausible explanation as to why, and when, a state of affairs is bad for a person when that person does not exist. So it is only rational to regard the *prospect* of death as an evil when

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<sup>4</sup> See Williams (1973) for this middle ground position that death—the termination of life—can be an evil, but need not be.

it would prevent the fulfillment of some desire, but it must be acknowledged that death, when it comes, cannot be an evil.

The discussion in Chapter Three demonstrates that there are good reasons to regard the prospect of death—the prospect of life’s termination—as an evil. If we are justified in regarding the future termination of our life as an evil for us, then we must consider whether there is a desirable alternative to a finite life. Chapter Four considers this alternative and addresses the following question: if we have good reason to regard our possible death as a misfortune, would immortality present a desirable alternative? Thomas Nagel, a deprivation theorist, holds that life is indefinitely good and everyone would be better off living forever.<sup>5</sup> Lucretius, an Epicurean, claims that nature provides an appropriate termination to life, and to live beyond the natural human life span would spoil the values of life.<sup>6</sup> Williams holds that a prolonged life may give us more time with the goods in life, but an indefinite life would be worse than a life cut short by death.<sup>7</sup> Williams argues against the desirability of immortality on the grounds that there is an insufficient amount of desires and pleasurable experiences that could sustain an unending life. Against Williams, I demonstrate that there are certain desires that can never be fulfilled, yet are endlessly satisfying in their pursuit, and these desires could sustain an immortal existence. Nonetheless, I conclude that immortality cannot present an attractive alternative to death because the removal of mortality brings with it the removal of the means by which the value of life is recognized. Thus, an immortal life could not be a recognizably human life.

Consideration of these puzzles pertaining to the metaphysical nature of death and the moral implications of that nature will determine that there cannot be a value to the state of being dead, there is a negative

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<sup>5</sup> Nagel (1970).

<sup>6</sup> Lucretius (1995). All citations for Lucretius refer to *Book III* of *De Rerum Natura*.

<sup>7</sup> Williams (1973).

value to the prospect of death if it prevents certain desires, and an instrumental value to the fact that we will die.<sup>8</sup> I conclude that the negative value of the prospect of the fact of death *can* rationally be regarded as an evil but need not be; the fact of death is a *necessary* condition of valuing the very things that death denies.

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<sup>8</sup>A positive value to the prospect of death could also be attached to death if it would bring an end to a life that is no longer worth living. This attitude towards death is considered and deemed rational throughout this thesis. I place more emphasis on the alternative attitude towards death (that death is bad for the person who died), as this intuition is the focus of the majority of the arguments considered.

# 1

## *The Epicureans: Death is Nothing to Us*

The philosophical debate concerning the metaphysical nature of death, and what moral implications, if any, that nature may have on us dates back to Epicurus who, under a materialist approach to philosophy, urges us to remove ourselves from anxieties concerning death so that we may reach the highest pleasure, *ataraxia*—a state of tranquility. Epicurus' attitude towards death was grounded in his empirical materialist theory about nature: atomism. According to him, everything that exists is part of nature—the material world—which is made up of small indivisible particles called atoms. Though each individual atom cannot be divisible, nature changes through different combinations of these atoms. One such combination of atoms that continuously changes is the body-soul compound. When human beings are alive, there is a combination of atoms in the form of the body and soul, and death is the dissolution of this compound.<sup>9</sup> Once the soul is separated from the body, resulting in a person's death, Epicurus claims that a person no longer exists because they are no longer a part of the material world. Death for Epicurus is the annihilation of a person's existence in the material world, and since the only things that exist are a part of the material world, death is the annihilation of the only life there is.

Epicurus and his pupil, Lucretius, believed that the true nature of death is a state of non-existence that is inaccessible to the material world. Death must be irrelevant to the living because there is no time in which a person and death co-exist. As Epicurus explains, 'when we exist, death is not yet present, and when death is present, then we do not exist', and from

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<sup>9</sup> Jenkyns (2007) ix.

this he concludes ‘death is nothing to us’.<sup>10</sup> This radical expression, ‘death is nothing to us’, is one that Epicurus and Lucretius assert several times throughout various discussions regarding death and its moral irrelevance. There have been some disputes over what exactly the Epicureans meant by this expression, and this chapter hopefully clarifies what Epicurus and Lucretius intended to argue about the nature of death. I begin with a discussion of Epicurus’ famous passage in the ‘Letter to Menoeceus’ where he presents two arguments,<sup>11</sup> both of which reach the conclusion that death cannot be bad for the person who dies, and in fact, there is no value to death; it is neither good nor bad. In general, when critics present Epicurus’ position on death, these two arguments are run together, however, I believe there are important differences in the arguments, and we can gain insight into Epicurus’ motivation behind his radical expression if we consider each argument separately.

A close examination of Epicurus’ arguments will show that Epicurus used the expression to make four claims regarding the moral implications of the nature of death: (1) death cannot be bad for the person who died, (2) it is irrational to fear death, (3) death should be regarded with an attitude of indifference, and (4) there is nothing bad in life’s being finite. All four conclusions were intended to hold to the state of being dead and death itself. Against Epicurus, I argue that the latter three cannot be reached from his arguments alone. I then turn to Lucretius who, like Epicurus, claims that death ‘is nothing to us, no concern’,<sup>12</sup> and consider whether or not Lucretius can provide an argument that can reach these three conclusions. I claim that Lucretius’ defense of Epicurus, and his additional arguments concerning what the correct attitude towards death should be, provide additional reasons to believe that nothing morally good or bad can befall one at a time when one no longer exists. But from the

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<sup>10</sup> Epicurus (1964) 417.

<sup>11</sup> Epicurus (1964).

<sup>12</sup> Lucretius (1995) 827.

arguments provided by Lucretius and Epicurus it cannot be determined, at this point in our discussion, that there is nothing fearful about death; and, therefore, it cannot be concluded that death is a matter for indifference or that there is nothing bad in the finitude of life.

### 1.1 Death Is Nothing to Us

In the ‘Letter to Menoeceus’, Epicurus begins his most insightful passage on what he takes to be the true nature of death by presenting a metaphysical argument that is grounded in hedonist moral claims. He states, ‘[g]et used to believing that death is nothing to us. For all good and bad consist in sense-experience, and death is the privation of sense-experience.’<sup>13</sup> As a strict hedonist, Epicurus holds that all goods and bads that can befall one must be experienced through pleasure and pain.<sup>14</sup> Since the state of being dead is a non-experiential state, death cannot have any moral implications for the one who died. As this argument is grounded in Epicurus’ moral theory,<sup>15</sup> it will be referred to as his Hedonist Argument, and can be structured as follows:

(HA) A state of affairs can be good or bad for a person only if that person can experience it as pleasurable or painful. Death is the privation of experience. Therefore, death can neither be good nor bad for the one who died, as it cannot be experienced as such.

The Hedonist Argument is meant to dispel any misconceptions related to the state of being dead and its being experienced as painful. Once it is understood that pain cannot be experienced once dead, it should also be understood that death cannot be bad for the person who died.

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<sup>13</sup> Epicurus (1964) 417.

<sup>14</sup> For the Epicureans, all good and evil must be experienced through the sensation of pleasure and pain. For some, the experience of pleasure and pain are only requirements for *intrinsic* (good or bad in itself) goods and bads, and moral goods or bads may befall one without one necessarily experiencing anything painful or pleasant. But as strict Hedonists, the Epicureans believe that intrinsic goods and bads are the *only* goods and bads that can befall one.

<sup>15</sup> Though this argument reflects his hedonist moral theory, it is important to note that it is still a metaphysical argument with moral implications. Death is the privation of experience, which is a necessary condition—according to a hedonist moral framework—for good and evil to befall an individual.

Nonetheless, the argument is only effective insofar as a connection between *badness* and *experience* holds. As we shall see in the chapter to follow, there are several moral theories which suggest that an evil can befall one without one experiencing anything unpleasant.<sup>16</sup> Against these theories however, Epicurus points out that death must be meaningless even for those who reject his hedonist moral framework. He then provides us with an additional argument that yields the same moral conclusion—death cannot be bad for the person who died—but is grounded in a metaphysical argument concerning personal identity after death. Epicurus writes,

[s]o death, the most frightening of bad things, is nothing to us; since when we exist, death is not yet present, and when death is present, then we do not exist. Therefore, it is relevant neither to the living nor to the dead, since it does not affect the former, and the latter do not exist.<sup>17</sup>

The above passage provides an additional metaphysical claim regarding the true nature of death; not only is death the privation of experience, but it is also the privation of *existence*. Once a subject's death occurs, that subject's identity—his personhood—is annihilated and the subject no longer exists in space and time. Epicurus then draws a moral conclusion regarding the concrete world where a subject's death occurred, and the abstract subject who no longer exists in space and time. This argument is grounded in what has become known as the 'Existence Condition':

(EC) A state of affairs can only be good or bad for a person if that person *exists* as a subject of possible experience at the time in which the state of affairs occurs.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> The connection between badness and experience will be a large topic of discussion in Chapter Two. For rejections to Epicurus that are grounded in this premise, see Nagel (1970), Brueckner and Fischer (1986), Feldman (1991), Kauffman (1999), and Pitcher (1984).

<sup>17</sup> Epicurus (1964).

<sup>18</sup> Jeff McMahan (1988) refers to this as the 'Existence Requirement'. It is more commonly referred to as the 'Existence Condition'; see Feldman (1991) and Fischer (1994).

According to this condition, a state of affairs cannot affect a person's well-being before the affairs have come about. A person can only be morally wronged by a state of affairs if that person exists at the time in which the state of affairs occurs. So the person, and the event that may potentially harm that person, must *co-exist* in order for a harm to take place. Since there is no time in which a person both exists and is dead, that person's being dead cannot be bad for that person.<sup>19</sup> Epicurus therefore presents an additional argument concerning the nature of death that is grounded in the connection between badness and *existence*. His 'Existence Argument' takes the following form:

(EA) A state of affairs can only be good or bad for a person if that person exists as a subject of possible experience at the time in which the state of affairs occurs. Death is the privation of a person's existence, and is therefore a time in which a person no longer exists as a subject of possible experience. Thus, death cannot be bad for the person who died.

Notice that (EA), though similar to (HA), is importantly different as it is an argument that is grounded in a connection between badness and *existence*, while (HA) is grounded in badness and *experience*. Although the conclusions of (EA) and (HA) both hold that death cannot be bad for the one who dies, (EA) also points out that death must be *meaningless* to all living beings because there is no point in which death intervenes on the living, and accordingly, the living never coincide with the dead. It is therefore concluded that death must be meaningless to all living persons as it is inaccessible to all persons while they are alive. While one may object to (HA) on the grounds that good and evil can befall an individual outside of that individual's experiential state, (EA) cannot be defused with such ease. To hold that death is an evil against (EA), one must make a case for *how* one can be harmed at times when one no longer exists. If this can be

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<sup>19</sup> Here 'dead' is meant to refer to the state of being dead, as well as death as the termination of a person's existence. Since each are times when the person is no longer alive, neither death nor the state of being dead can co-exist with a concrete person; thus, a person cannot be harmed by death or the state of being dead.



done, it is not without difficulty, as one must make a connection between badness and *non-existence*, and determine how concrete states of affairs can be relevant to a person who no longer exists in space and time.

Furthermore, to object to (EA) and hold that death is bad for the one who died, or that states of affairs can be bad for one when one no longer exists, raises a puzzle concerning *when* the evil occurs—before or after one’s death. As Epicurus explained, death does not have any effect on the living because when we are alive, death has yet to come. It is therefore unclear how death can be bad for a person *before* it occurs.<sup>20</sup> And if we can account for how death can be bad for a person after the person died, we then face another puzzle concerning *who* is harmed by death, since one no longer exists once dead. In each reply, we must account for some entity that cannot be located in space and time; either death has yet to come, or a subject no longer remains. Therefore, to argue against (EA), one must make a connection between badness and non-existence to demonstrate *how* death can be an evil for the person who died.<sup>21</sup>

It is evident from (EA) that merely objecting to a hedonist moral theory is insufficient to rebut Epicurus’ arguments on the nature of death. Even if one argues against (HA), one must still address the puzzles

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<sup>20</sup> This issue regarding how death could be bad for a person before it occurs is a large topic of discussion in Chapter Three. I suggest that Epicurus was right: once death occurs it cannot be bad for the person who died because a person no longer exists once dead, and thus, there is no time at which death can harm the person who died. But against Epicurus, I claim that death (not the state of being dead), though it is a time in which persons no longer exist, has an effect on living persons insofar as it is understood that death is an unavoidable end. Therefore, I suggest the anticipation of our inevitable deaths can be regarded as something bad for us, if our possible deaths would prevent the fulfillment of some present desire or pursuit. Viewed in this way we can reconstruct Epicurus’ argument to hold: death cannot be bad once it occurs, but it can be regarded as bad in its *prospect*.

<sup>21</sup> These three puzzles concerning how death could be an evil for the person who died are the underlying topic of discussion in Chapter Two. It will be argued that (HA) can be defused by rejecting the connection between badness and experience; nonetheless, merely rejecting (HA) is insufficient to deal with these additional puzzles as they all pertain to how a person can be wronged when that person no longer exists. Therefore, to object to (HA), one must also object to (EA), and it will be concluded that this cannot be done successfully.

pertaining to (EA) in order to provide a plausible account for how an event can be bad for a person when that person no longer exists. This issue concerning death and badness, though it has moral implications, is not, in fact, merely a moral issue, but also a metaphysical one. Throughout this thesis, I offer a defense of Epicurus' (HA) and (EA), and it is important to note that in doing so, I am not defending a hedonist moral theory; I am merely offering a defense of the existence condition—that good and evil cannot befall a subject who no longer exists.

Despite my defense of these two arguments, I suggest that the additional conclusions Epicurus draws from these arguments can only apply to the state of being dead, and not to death. So my position on the nature of death is Epicurean insofar as I share the view that neither death, nor the state of being dead, can be bad for the person who died once these events come about. Nonetheless, I suggest that there are good reasons, even if we accept (HA) and (EA), to regard the fact of death, that is, the fact that we will die, as bad or good for us before our deaths occur. In the next section, I present Epicurus' additional conclusions pertaining to the nature of death and what that nature can tell us about the correct attitude to hold towards our future deaths. It is clear that Epicurus intended these conclusions to apply to death as the termination of one's existence as well as the state of being dead. Against Epicurus, I claim that the additional conclusions drawn from (HA) and (EA) are plausible where the state of being dead is concerned, but are insufficient to justify changing our attitudes towards our future deaths.

## **1.2 The Fact of Death and The State of Being Dead**

Recall that there is a distinction between death and the state of being dead. The state of being dead is a non-experiential state that follows from a person's termination of life. Death is the event that marks the beginning of that state. We may also say that death is the event that marks the end of the processes of dying, or the end of one's life. While death is the

termination of a person's existence, and therefore a person no longer exists once that person's death occurs, death *is* relevant to the living in a way that the state of being dead is not, because death marks the end of a person's life. So Epicurus may be correct in his claim that the state of being dead is irrelevant to the living, but the same cannot be said for death. We cannot experience death, but as mortal beings, we know that death is an unavoidable end. And our awareness of our mortality, of the fact that we will die, can have important implications on the way in which we live our lives.<sup>22</sup> When we look forward to our possible deaths, and regard death as an evil, it is the *termination* of our existence, the termination of our own life, that we regard as a great evil for us.<sup>23</sup> This termination of life, the condition of being finite, concerns only death and not the state of being dead.

The distinction between death and the state of being dead can, perhaps, be better understood when we appeal to different philosophical and religious views concerning what happens after death. It is generally held as true that death, by definition, is the termination of a living person's life from the actual world. This is true even for those who believe that there is some life after death. If what follows from death is some afterlife, death is still defined as the end of a person's life from this world, the only difference then, between this view, and our present view, concerns the state of being dead. For the Epicureans, and for this thesis, the state of being dead is a non-experiential state of non-existence, whereas for others, the state of being dead is an experiential state that exists not in the actual world, but in some *other* world. So even if what follows from death is

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<sup>22</sup> Throughout this thesis I use the phrase 'the fact that we will die', which is synonymous with the phrase 'the fact of death'. 'The fact that we will die' must not be confused, or assimilated with the process of dying, as it concerns the fact that life will *terminate*, not the process of life terminating. So when I use this phrase, I am referring only to death.

<sup>23</sup> The fact that death annihilates a person, so that a person no longer exists once dead and cannot experience anything unpleasant from being dead, offers no comfort for Steven Luper. He argues that because death is annihilation, death must be an evil, as the termination of *my* life is the greatest evil I could imagine befalling *me*. See Luper (1987).

some other form of life, it is still conceded that death is the termination of a person's existence in *this* world. Therefore, the commonly held belief that my death is bad for me because it is the annihilation of my existence, specifically concerns death and *not* the state of being dead, because *death* is what brings about this termination, while the state of being dead merely follows this termination. Any belief about an afterlife, then, is meant to reduce the fear of the termination of life, since it follows that death is not bad for one because it is not the end of the only life there is; it is only the end of life in *this* world. Epicurus, on the other hand, attempts to show that when death occurs, it cannot be painful or bad because one enters into a state of non-existence.

So Epicurus believes that, by proving that existence is necessary for badness, we can be released from any fears or anxieties pertaining to that fact that we are finite beings. However, in this section I claim that, even though (HA) and (EA) persuasively demonstrate that—once our finitude occurs—there is nothing bad in the termination or absence of life, these arguments are nonetheless, insufficient to justifying the conclusion that our finitude cannot be bad for us *before* it occurs. In short, I claim that it is not irrational to regard the prospect of our deaths as bad for us or something to be feared, even though we know from (HA) and (EA) that neither death, nor the state of being dead, are bad when they occur.

Epicurus did not explicitly distinguish between the state of being dead and death. It is clear at times when he writes 'death is nothing to us', that his intention concerns the state only, yet it is also clear that (HA) and (EA) apply to both terms. This is generally agreed upon by Epicurean critics.<sup>24</sup> One recent defense of the Epicurean position suggests that his arguments refer exclusively to the state of being dead.<sup>25</sup> This, I believe, is

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<sup>24</sup> See Luper (1987), Nagel (1979, 1986), and Williams (1973).

<sup>25</sup> Rosenbaum (1986) offers a defense of Epicurus' arguments and conclusions on the nature of death, explaining that these would only make sense where death is interpreted as the state of being dead. When Epicurus (1964) states, 'since when we exist, death is not yet present, and when death is present, then we do not exist', Rosenbaum explains that Epicurus is most plausibly referring to death as the state of being dead. However, the

simply not true, and is an implausible attempt to defend Epicurus from his antagonists (the reasons why are clarified in section 1.3 when I present his additional conclusions regarding the nature of death). And even if it were true that (HA) and (EA) only concern the state of being dead, it was Epicurus' intent to use these arguments to free us from anxieties towards the fact that we will die—anxieties which can *only* be cured by the realization that neither death nor the state of being dead are bad for us once we are dead. Where (HA) and (EA) are concerned however, it is irrelevant whether Epicurus had the death/state of being dead distinction in mind, as each argument refers to a time in which a person does not exist, and therefore the arguments are applicable to the state of being dead as well as death. Nonetheless, from these arguments Epicurus goes on to draw three additional conclusions concerning how we should regard our future deaths and our future states of non-existence, and it is within these conclusions that the distinction between being dead and death becomes relevant.

### **1.3 Epicurus' Additional Claims: Indifference, Fear, and Finitude**

Given (HA) and (EA), Epicurus draws three conclusions pertaining to how the living should regard their future deaths. He claims that since death and the state of being dead are non-experiential states and times in which one no longer exists, death should not be feared as it only brings with it unnecessary pain in its anticipation, when it is not bad in its occurrence. Additionally, since there is no value to death in its occurrence, one should not place a value in its prospect; therefore, the correct attitude towards death is one of indifference. The realization that death cannot be bad for us once we are dead should prompt us to abandon any alternative to death; hence, we should relieve ourselves from any desire to prolong life or live

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Epicurean statement is plausible on either interpretation, as death is an event that cannot be present while one is alive. Furthermore, in the passage that Rosenbaum is concerned with, there is one statement that cannot be rendered plausible when death is interpreted as the state of being dead, which is discussed in section 1.3.

immortally. Thus, provided (HA) and (EA), Epicurus draws the following three conclusions: (1) it is irrational to fear death, (2) death should be regarded as matter of indifference, and (3) one should not be troubled by life's finitude. In the following passage, it is clear that these conclusions do not hold exclusively to the state of being dead:

Hence, a correct knowledge of the fact that death is nothing to us makes the *mortality* of life a matter for contentment, not by adding a limitless time [to life] but by removing the longing for immortality.<sup>26</sup>

In the above passage, Epicurus explains that our *mortality* should not trouble us. To be content with our mortality—the condition of being finite—entails that we are content with the fact that we will die; that is, that we will inevitably be the subjects of death. If we are untroubled by the fact that our lives will necessarily terminate, we must be untroubled by our unavoidable deaths, where death is understood as the termination our lives. So the Epicurean conclusion that we should adopt an attitude of indifference towards death cannot be exclusive to the state, but must also include the event of termination. Thus, indifference, for Epicurus, is the correct attitude to hold towards death *and* the state of being dead.

Epicurus explains that we can be relieved of any troubles from the fact of death (the fact that *my* life will terminate) by 'adding a limitless time to life' or 'by removing the longing for immortality.'<sup>27</sup> Epicurus opts for the latter, and explains that from (HA) and (EA), one should not fear death or the state of being dead because 'there is nothing fearful in the

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<sup>26</sup> Epicurus (1964) 417, [my emphasis].

<sup>27</sup> Epicurus (1964) 417. The two options—provided by Epicurus to remove any anxieties towards death—are to either show that the absence of life cannot be bad, or that life is not over once it has been terminated from this world, and in fact, continues on in some other, metaphysical realm. Since Epicurus as a materialist, holds that life is completely terminated (that is, a person's identity is annihilated once a person's material body is destroyed, so that a person ceases to be a person) once death occurs, the idea that some individual could continue on in another realm is not a possibility for him. Therefore, he sets out to prove from (HA) and (EA) that the termination of life, and the period of non-existence that follows from this termination, cannot be bad for the person who dies. Furley (1986) provides a clear explanation of these two possibilities and Epicurus' method to cure any anxieties related to the termination of life.

absence of life.<sup>28</sup> The (correct) knowledge that nothing can be good or bad for one when one no longer exists is, I suggest, sufficient to prove that it is irrational to fear the *state* of being dead as it is a state of non-existence. It is not, however, sufficient to prove that there is nothing fearful in the *termination* of life; thus, (HA) and (EA) are ineffective in yielding the conclusion that we should not fear our future deaths. Consequently, the additional conclusions—that death should be regarded with indifference, and that we have no reason to resent our finitude or desire for an infinite life—cannot follow from (HA) and (EA) if we can still have reasons to fear our future deaths. For, if we can fear the termination of life, then it is not the case that death is a matter of indifference for us, nor that we are untroubled by the finitude of life.

It is important at this point, to reiterate that (HA) and (EA) hold that death is neither bad nor *good* for the person who died. So the fact that death is nothing to us, or in other words, the fact that there is no value to death when it occurs should, according to Epicurus, show us that there is nothing to fear about our future deaths, which is why he concludes that we should regard death with an attitude of indifference. But if it is irrational to fear death on the grounds that death is *value-less* when it occurs, then it is equally irrational to regard death as a welcomed end. There are times when the termination of life may be regarded as something *good*, the case where life is no longer worth living is at least one example where one may look forward to one's death, and regard death as a welcomed end to one's impoverished existence. If (HA) and (EA), in proving that death and the state of being dead cannot have any moral implications on us, are sufficient in removing any negative value we may hold in our attitudes towards our future deaths, then they must also be sufficient in removing any positive attitudes we may have towards our future deaths. Here, it seems, Epicurus' arguments have moved us in the wrong direction, for if

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<sup>28</sup> Epicurus (1964) 417.

he is correct, then two commonly held attitudes towards death must be considered irrational.

I suggest that Epicurus was right insofar as there is a connection between badness (or goodness) and existence. Therefore, (HA) and (EA) must hold, as we have yet to determine how something may be bad for one without one's being alive.<sup>29</sup> Nonetheless, I suggest that it is not irrational to regard the *prospect* of our deaths as something bad for us if it prevents us from some future desire or pursuit.<sup>30</sup> If we desire something, we desire a future state of affairs in which that desire can be fulfilled; the fact that death cannot be bad for us when it occurs does not entail that it is irrational to regard the prospect of our deaths as something bad for us, if it prevents us from getting what we want.<sup>31</sup> Equally, the fact that death, when it occurs, cannot be good for us, does not make it irrational to look forward to the prospect of death as a welcomed end when life is no longer worth living. Thus, even though (EA) and (HA) demonstrate that there cannot be a moral value to death when it occurs, we can still have good reasons, before it comes about, to regard the *prospect* of death as something good or bad for us. So Epicurus' three conclusions—death is a matter of indifference, it is irrational to fear death, and it is irrational to desire a prolonged life—cannot, I suggest, be reached from (HA) and (EA) alone.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> I offer a defense of the existence condition, and the connection between badness (or goodness) and existence, from the objections proposed by the anti-Epicureans in Chapter Two.

<sup>30</sup> This argument, that death can be rationally regarded as bad or good in its prospect, is presented in 3.3. This argument owes much to Bernard Williams, and his discussion on the nature of death.

<sup>31</sup> Williams argues that certain desires provide a disutility for which death can reasonably be regarded as an evil, despite the fact that one no longer exists once dead. Luper (1987) also holds a similar argument, as he believes that death is bad because of what it prevents. Williams' theory and the suggestion of badness and prevention are addressed in Chapter Three.

<sup>32</sup> Ultimately, I argue that some of these conclusions can be made, however (HA) and (EA) are not, at this point, sufficient to yield the intended conclusions.



#### 1.4 Lucretius' Defense: The Symmetry and Banquet Argument

Like Epicurus, Lucretius believes that death 'is nothing to us, no concern, [o]nce we grant that the soul will also die'.<sup>33</sup> Lucretius accepts (HA) and (EA), agreeing with Epicurus that death is the annihilation of a person's existence, and since one no longer exists once dead, death should not trouble us. Unlike Epicurus however, Lucretius provides additional arguments to (HA) and (EA) to demonstrate why we should accept Epicurus' conclusion that it is irrational to fear death. This section considers two arguments presented by Lucretius which are meant to reach Epicurus' three conclusions—that it is irrational to fear death, death should be regarded with an attitude of indifference, and life's finitude should not troubles us—that I claimed cannot be reached from (HA) and (EA) alone. After presenting Lucretius' arguments, I suggest that they too, at our present point in the debate, cannot reach Epicurus' three conclusions. But they do present additional problems that must be faced when considering how death may be an evil for the person who died.

An attempt to remove the fear of death, and more specifically, the fear of non-existence, Lucretius points out that all living beings were subjects of states of non-existence prior to birth. Holding Epicurus' conclusion from (EA), that there is a connection between badness and existence, Lucretius demonstrates that this connection must hold because we do not regard our past non-existence—the time before our births—as a time in which we were harmed. Lucretius explains,

Reflect how the span of the endless ancient past  
Before our birth means nothing at all to us.  
Here Nature has provided us a mirror  
Of the time to come when we at last have died.<sup>34</sup>

Appealing to facts given by nature, Lucretius points out that the time before our births and the time after our deaths are two *equal* periods where we do not exist. Since our prenatal non-existence meant nothing to us, it

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<sup>33</sup> Lucretius (1995) 827-829.

<sup>34</sup> Lucretius (1995) 969-972.

follows that our posthumous non-existence should equally mean nothing to us. Furthermore, since we do not regard our prenatal non-existence as something bad or something to be feared, it would be irrational to regard our posthumous non-existence in this way, as it is a period of non-existence symmetrical to the one that we have already undergone. Lucretius' Symmetry Argument can be stated as follows:

(SA) Prenatal and posthumous non-existence are two equal states of non-existence. Since we do not regard our past non-existence as bad, nor did we fear it, it would be irrational to regard our future non-existence as bad or something to be feared. Therefore, death is not bad for the one who dies and should not be feared.

From (HA) and (EA), Epicurus showed us that existence is a necessary condition for good and evil to befall a person. Given (SA), we have an example to test the connection between badness and existence. If we reflect on our past non-existence, and see that there was nothing bad for us in that state of non-existence, we have no reason to regard our future non-existence that follows from death as bad for us. Moreover, given (SA), from our previous state of non-existence we can acknowledge that there is nothing bad or fearful about a state of non-existence; therefore, it is irrational to fear death as it is a state of non-existence symmetrical to the one that preceded life.

There are two important issues to mention in light of (SA). On the one hand, the argument offers a strong defense of (HA) and (EA): given (SA), the Epicurean opponent must now address another puzzle and account for why our prenatal non-existence was bad for us, or propose an asymmetry between two seemingly symmetrical periods. On the other hand, (SA) does nothing to remove our fear of the fact of death. Like (HA) and (EA), it merely demonstrates that it is irrational to fear the *state of being dead*, but it cannot prove that it is irrational to fear the *fact that we will die*. Given (SA), (HA), and (EA), the connection between badness and experience appears to hold, and it is plausible to argue that it is irrational to fear the state of being dead because nothing bad can occur

when one no longer exists. Yet (SA) provides no comfort concerning the fact that our lives will inevitably end. Therefore, I maintain that the knowledge that nothing can be bad for us if we do not exist is insufficient in rendering our fear of death (the fear that life will terminate) as irrational.<sup>35</sup>

Yet Lucretius provides us with another argument, which breaks away from the Epicurean emphasis on badness and existence, and offers a therapeutic explanation for why we should not be troubled by the fact that we will die. Within this argument, it is clear that Lucretius maintains that the state of being dead, and death *simpliciter*, cannot be good or bad once they occur, but he suggests that death has an instrumental value to the structure of our lives. So for Lucretius, death is not valuable in itself, but there is a connection between the fact of death and the value of life. This relationship, perhaps, can provide us with a more convincing account for why we should accept Epicurus' claim that we should not be troubled by life's finitude.

Lucretius explains that there is a temporal structure to nature that is analogous to the structure of a banquet.<sup>36</sup> Like a banquet, nature provides life with a beginning, middle, and end, and the values in life are best in enjoyed through this temporal structure. Death, being the termination of life, provides the limitation to life so that it can have this temporal structure. So if the values in life are best enjoyed through a temporal

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<sup>35</sup> We could raise issue with (SA) on the (epistemological) grounds that before birth there appears to be no subject of reference, while after death there is an obvious subject that can be referred to—the person who was previously alive. In other words, if a state of affairs is of some value to one prior to one's birth, there is no person who exists or *has* existed that makes it possible to attribute some meaning to. Posthumously however, there is a subject that has existed at some time to which we may refer. Of course, according to the Existence Condition, this is not troubling to the Epicureans, but for those who are not moved by the Epicurean's arguments and claim persons can be harmed even when they do *not* exist, this may open a pathway for contention. Nonetheless, upon considering the anti-Epicurean arguments, I claim in Chapter Two that the Existence Condition cannot be rejected. Therefore, for my purposes, the fact that there is no subject of reference in prenatal non-existence, yet there appears to be one in posthumous non-existence, is unproblematic for (SA)—as long as the Existence Condition holds, (SA) holds.

<sup>36</sup> Lucretius (1995) 935-959.

structure analogous to that of a banquet, we need not desire to prolong life or resent that life will inevitably end, since our finitude, according to Lucretius, plays an *instrumental* role in the way in which life's values are best enjoyed. His Banquet Argument can be stated as follows:

[BA] Life's values are best enjoyed through the appropriate temporal structure provided by nature. Death places the limitation to life so that life terminates. If death were removed from life, it would disrupt the temporal structure for which underlies how life's values are best enjoyed. Therefore, the fact that we will die cannot be bad.

Lucretius provides us with a therapeutic argument, (BA), that is meant to reach the conclusions Epicurus intended to draw from (HA) and (EA). Given (BA), we should recognize that the fact that we will die holds in relation to our lives being valuable. And this fact, along with the knowledge that once death occurs, death cannot be bad for the one who died, should release us from any anxieties concerning our mortality or any desire to prolong life. The fact of death is an unavoidable end for all living beings, and Lucretius points out that if one cannot 'be content' with that fact of death, one will have 'rifled all life has to win.'<sup>37</sup>

(BA), in suggesting that there is an instrumental value to death, is a very important argument for the purposes of this thesis. The description of life's timeline through the metaphor of a banquet suggests that life is full of pleasant experiences, and to die before the main course would be a misfortune, 'for it will make fruitless those "courses" in the meal whose primary function was to prepare appetite and palate for the main course.'<sup>38</sup> Yet it also suggests that once life has exceeded its natural limit, it will become less valuable.<sup>39</sup> As Lucretius explains, '[e]ven if you outlived the generations, and you became immortal—even then, it will be *more* of the same' because there is no 'further pleasure' obtained in extending life

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<sup>37</sup> Lucretius (1995) 959, 953.

<sup>38</sup> Nussbaum (1944) 211.

<sup>39</sup> See Chapter Three for a more detailed discussion regarding (BA) and why a life would become less valuable if it were prolonged.

beyond its natural limit. So if life were prolonged far beyond its appropriate termination, then this extension of life would tarnish the values of the preceding ‘courses’.<sup>40</sup>

More importantly, (BA) claims that life’s being valuable at all depends on the fact that it will end. So we can see that (BA) provides us with good reasons to regard an untimely death as something to be avoided as well as providing us with reasons to become content with the fact that we will die. The intuition that the fact of death shapes the values of life is one that I share with Lucretius, and ultimately, I claim that (BA) does in fact provide us with good reasons to accept the Epicurean conclusion that we should not be troubled by life’s finitude. However, at this point in the discussion, the argument does not yield the other two conclusions. Even if such a relation between death and life’s being valuable holds, as (BA) also points out, it can still be the case that an untimely death would be bad for us, and therefore, (BA) does not prove that it is irrational to fear death or regard it as something bad.

### **1.5 Conclusions**

I have shown that Epicurus used the radical expression ‘death is nothing to us’ to infer four conclusions: (1) death cannot be bad for the person who died because existence is a necessary condition for badness, and death is the privation of existence, (2) death is a matter of indifference, (3) it is irrational to fear death, and (4) it is irrational to be troubled by life’s finitude. I claimed that, from (HA), (EA), (SA), and (BA), we still have good reasons to regard the fact of death as something good or bad for us before it occurs because these arguments cannot prove that it is irrational to regard an untimely future death as something fearful or bad. From (BA), however, we saw that—even though death itself is nothing for the Epicureans—the fact of death may play an instrumental role in the value of life. The connection which Lucretius points out between the fact of

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<sup>40</sup> Lucretius (2007) 948-948, 944.

death and value may be able to explain why we tend to attach a disvalue to death in its prospect, even though it has no value in its occurrence. To establish what values we can rationally attribute to our future deaths, we must first consider the anti-Epicurean arguments, which claim that it is rational to fear our future deaths, as the non-existence that follows from death is a time when a person is deprived of the goods of life.

## 2

### *The Anti-Epicureans*

The Epicurean arguments against the evil of death have been the subject of intense philosophical debate in recent years.<sup>41</sup> Most philosophers find the arguments unconvincing to support the radical conclusion.<sup>42</sup> Antagonists of the Epicurean position generally seek an objection to the Existence Condition, and attempt to form an analogy between harms that may befall a person outside of that person's experiential state to propose an argument for why death can be considered an evil, even though it is not experienced as such.

The discussion of the Epicurean arguments in chapter one determined that if death is an evil for the person who died, then there are four puzzles that must be addressed to make this a plausible position to hold. From (HA) and (EA), it must be explained *how* death is an evil if it cannot be experienced as such, since one no longer exists once dead. This first puzzle is not limited to, but is in direct relation to the Existence Condition—a state of affairs can only be good or bad for a person if that person exists as a subject of possible experience at the time in which the state of affairs occurs—and if this puzzle can be solved, one must make a connection between badness and non-existence. The two subsequent puzzles concern the fact that there appears to be no immediate connection between the two, as there is no time in which a person and death co-exist, and it is therefore puzzling as to *when* death can be bad for the person

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<sup>41</sup> Since Thomas Nagel's famous paper, 'Death' (1970), the Epicurean arguments have been the subject of strong philosophical criticism.

<sup>42</sup> There has been a wide range of papers that criticize the Epicureans and I attempt to offer a variety of the anti-Epicurean position in this chapter. Fischer's (1993) and Benatar's (2004) anthology include several influential works criticizing the Epicureans. Most of these articles reject the Epicurean conclusions; for a recent defense of Epicurus see Rosenbaum (1986, 1989). Also see Nussbaum (1994) who offers a modern defense of Epicureanism with a specific focus on Lucretius' arguments.

died, and *who* the subject of the evil of death is. There are two possible replies to the timing puzzle: either death is bad for a person *before* death occurs, or *after* the person died. On the former reply, there is an obvious subject of harm, but it is unclear how an event can affect us before it occurs. If it is the latter, it is hard to discern *who* the subject of the harm is, given that a person does not exist once dead. And finally, provided (SA), there is a fourth puzzle concerning how posthumous non-existence is bad for a person when prenatal non-existence was not. To address this issue, one must either explain how prenatal non-existence was bad for us, even though it is not typically regarded as such, or propose an asymmetry between two seemingly equal states of non-existence.

This chapter presents the various responses the Anti-Epicureans propose to resolve these four pressing issues. The anti-Epicurean responses considered in this chapter argue that the ‘how’ puzzle can be resolved by appealing to features outside of death, and considering what one misses out on once dead. It is suggested that even though death is not an evil in itself, it is an evil in what it *deprives* one of, the goods of life. According to this position, both death and the state of being dead are an evil for the person who died, as each involve a time when one no longer exists and is deprived of additional pleasurable experiences with the goods of life. So when we ask ‘how’ death is an evil for the person who died, the deprivation theorists explain that death is an evil of *deprivation* from the goods of life.

The first deprivation account considered is one proposed by Thomas Nagel, who attempts to solve the additional puzzles by explaining that good and evil can befall a subject outside of the boundaries of a person’s location in space and time. Nagel and his defenders, offer various examples that are meant to be analogous to the harm involved with death, where a person is harmed outside of his experiential state and temporal location. Nonetheless, I claim that these examples cannot present a perfect analogy to the evil that we are concerned with in death,



as in each case, a subject still exists at the time in which the evil occurred, while a subject no longer exists at the time in which death occurs. The discussion of Nagel's account determines that he cannot provide a plausible solution to the 'when' and 'who' puzzle once it is clear that his analogy, and any variation of it, does not hold to the nature of the evil of death.

I then go on to consider a sophisticated deprivation account to determine if it can resolve the puzzles that Nagel and his supporters could not offer. Fred Feldman proposes a deprivation argument similar to Nagel's by appealing to other possible worlds. On Feldman's account, through a consideration of modality, we have a clear answer to the 'who' and 'when' question: a person's death is *eternally* an evil for *him* if he would have been better off in the nearest possible world where he did not die. Although Feldman appears more successful in coping with the 'when' and 'who' puzzle than Nagel and Fischer, when we go on to consider his reply to the fourth puzzle, it becomes evident that his solutions are just as problematic as the one's offered by Nagel and his defenders.

## 2.1 The Deprivation Account

The anti-Epicurean position that has been given the most attention is one that identifies the nature of the evil involved in death to be an evil of *deprivation*. This position is typically attributed to Nagel,<sup>43</sup> who holds that the state of being dead is not an evil in itself, but it is evil in what it deprives: life. According to Nagel, life is *always* good and valuable. Death, whenever it occurs, deprives one of the goods in life; therefore, death is necessarily an evil. Although Nagel has identified deprivation to be the nature of the evil involved with death, he must explain *when* the evil of death occurs and *who* death is an evil for if one no longer exists once dead.

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<sup>43</sup> Nagel (1970).

To indicate how death can be an evil of deprivation despite these puzzles, Nagel objects to Epicurus' (HA)—death cannot be good or bad for the person who died because it cannot be experienced as such—and claims that goods and bads can befall a person without that person necessarily experiencing anything pleasant or painful. Nagel explains that 'most good and ill fortune has as its subject a person identified by his history and his possibilities, rather than merely by his categorical state of the moment',<sup>44</sup> and since a person's identity includes features outside of his immediate awareness, good and bad can befall a person outside of the boundaries of that person's experiential state.

If the moral framework were to only include, as (HA) claims, goods and bads that are experienced as pleasurable or painful, then several events, not limited to death alone, would count as valid objections to what events are typically viewed as an evil. For instance, we often consider betrayal to be an evil for the one who is betrayed, though that person is unaware of the betrayal. Nagel supposes that death is an evil analogous to the evil of betrayal,<sup>45</sup> and since it is reasonable to assume that a friend's betrayal would be an evil for *me*, it would be equally reasonable to assume that my death would be an evil for *me*, even though, in both cases, I am neither aware nor experience anything painful from the evil that has occurred. Furthermore, it is intuitively rational to fear a friend's betrayal, and if death is an evil analogous to betrayal, then it would be rational to fear my future death.

Given the analogy between betrayal and death, we may be willing to concede to Nagel that there need not be a necessary connection between badness and experience. But, it must be asked, is the time in which the betrayal occurs the same time at which an evil befalls the *person* who is betrayed? In other words, do we fear betrayal and regard it as an evil because of the act of betrayal itself, or because of the pain that we would

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<sup>44</sup> Nagel (1970) 77.

<sup>45</sup> Nagel (1970) 76.

experience if we learned of the betrayal? Perhaps the reason we tend to believe, as Nagel does, that certain harms can befall us outside of our experiential state, is due to the fact that we could potentially learn about the harm at some future point in time. So the question concerns whether a harm befalls a person at the precise time at which the act of betrayal occurred, or is it only a harm if a person learns about the betrayal at some future time? While we may pity a person who is betrayed, if the subject of betrayal never learns about the betrayal, then there is no precise time, from *the point of view of the person who is betrayed*, in which the person's life is worse for *that person*. Even though we, judging from the outside, believe the person's life to be less valuable. But the relevant issue we are concerned with in our discussion about the value of death, is whether there are reasons for the person who dies, to regard death from his point of view, as bad for him. Merely pointing out, through the analogy of betrayal, that there is a precise time in which others can regard that person's death as bad for him, cannot resolve the relevant issue at hand. We must be able to identify *precisely when* the evil of death, from the perspective of the subject of death, is bad for the *subject who dies*.

In the case of betrayal, since the subject of betrayal exists at the time at which the betrayal occurred, we may be able to identify a precise time in which the betrayal was bad for that person. When a man is betrayed, he does not know of his misfortune, but he could at some later time, and that possibility is perhaps why we typically regard such evils that occur outside of one's awareness to indeed constitute an evil. It appears then, that there is an analogy between betrayal and death insofar as, if death is an evil, like betrayal, it cannot be experienced as such. But there is also a disanalogy: when a person is betrayed, it is *possible* for that person to learn of the betrayal and experience it as bad for him at some time. The precise time then, that a man's betrayal is bad for *him* is when he learns about the betrayal that occurred as he recognizes *at the time in which he learns about the betrayal*, that his life, right now, is worse off

from that past event.<sup>46</sup> But when a person is dead, it is *impossible* for that person to learn or experience any pain from the evil resulting in death. Therefore, there is no precise time in which a person's death can be bad for that person. The evil of betrayal, then, does not necessarily refute (HA), as a person is still a subject of *possible* experience, and *could* experience the betrayal as something bad for *him* at some later time.<sup>47</sup>

Nagel presents another example of a state of affairs that would constitute an evil for a person even though that person does not experience anything painful from the evil that befalls him. This second example is meant to move us closer to the nature of the evil we are concerned with in death, as it is unclear whether the person who is harmed still exists. In an attempt to object to the Existence Condition and (EA), Nagel asks us to imagine a case where an intelligent man undergoes a severe brain injury, reducing him to the mental state of an infant. The man does not possess sufficient brain capacity to know or learn of his reduced condition, and is in fact content in his childlike post-injury condition. Though this man does not mind his present condition, Nagel claims that there is nonetheless a misfortune: '[if] we consider the person he was, and the person he *could* be now, then his reduction to this state and the cancellation of his natural adult development constitute a perfectly intelligible catastrophe.'<sup>48</sup> Provided this explanation, Nagel claims that certain misfortunes can be evaluated in terms of a subject's possibilities and histories even when that subject can no longer be temporally located. We should therefore not be

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<sup>46</sup> For similar criticisms regarding how this example fails to produce a case analogous to death, see Rosenbaum (1986), Silverstein (1980), and Nussbaum (1994), who point out that even though the subject does not know of the misfortune, he *can* learn about his misfortune, whereas this is not a possibility with death.

<sup>47</sup> Rosenbaum elucidates on this point explaining, 'we can grant that what one *does not* consciously experience can hurt one without granting that what one *cannot* experience can hurt one.' Nagel faults in providing an adequate example as the betrayal case merely shows a subject who *does not* experience the harm, while in the case of death, the subject *cannot* experience any harm. Therefore, the example will only hold if he can show that in both cases, the subject *cannot*, or rather that it is *impossible* for the subject to experience the harm at any time in the future. See Rosenbaum (1986) 127.

<sup>48</sup> Nagel (1970) 77.

concerned that the intelligent man has ‘disappeared’, and while he cannot be presently located, the brain injury is nonetheless a misfortune for the intelligent man, because it harms his future possibilities as an intelligent person. Similarly, death is an evil for the person who died because it deprives that person’s future possibilities of the goods of life.

Nagel presents us with an interesting argument that accounts for the intuitive assumption that life is generally good, and the termination of my life appears to be a great evil for *me*. He has a clear answer to the question of how death can be an evil and why we regard it as such: death is an evil because it deprives us of the goods of life. And the person who is harmed by death is indeed the person who died, as the subject of the evil of death is located in the features of the dead person: his undeveloped possibilities. But here Nagel runs into a serious difficulty: *how* can my possibilities be harmed if I no longer exist? A person’s history and possibilities are features of that person. When a person dies, that person ceases to exist, and his features cease to exist along with him. The grounds for a person’s misfortune then, his possibilities, no longer exist.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Even if we concede to Nagel that certain goods and bads can befall one outside of the temporal boundaries of one’s life, we cannot locate the features that are meant to be the grounds of the misfortune of death if the person, and his features, no longer exist once dead.

Furthermore, Nagel’s attempt to explain how one may be harmed outside of one’s temporal career failed, as in each example; there is some degree to which the subject still persists.<sup>51</sup> This is abundantly clear in the betrayal example: the person who is betrayed, though outside of his

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<sup>49</sup> Furley expresses a similar criticism, becoming particularly uncomfortable with the vagueness of possibilities and which possibilities death is meant to deprive. See Furley (1986) 88. Nussbaum (1994) also shares this criticism.

<sup>50</sup> Williams explains that any argument which holds that death is an evil for the person who died, or any features of that person, will run into difficulties with Epicurus’ (EA) because once a person no longer exists, then *a fortiori*, there are no such grounds for the misfortune. See Williams (1973) 89.

<sup>51</sup> Martha Nussbaum also finds Nagel’s examples unconvincing since in each example a subject persists, while once dead, the subject is completely annihilated. See Nussbaum (1995) 205-206.

temporal awareness, the misfortune is still within the boundaries of his temporal *existence*. In the case of the intelligent man, there is some subject who exists, who closely resembles (at the very least in appearance) the previously intelligent man to which we can refer to when attributing a misfortune. Nagel, however, denies this. According to him, personal identity is determined according to one's physical brain.<sup>52</sup> We could suppose that the injury was so severe that it radically altered the brain to the point where it is determined that the intelligent man no longer exists, and a different person, a childlike person, now exists in his adult body. If this is indeed the case, then Nagel has presented us with an example perfectly analogous to death because both the person who died and the intelligent man, on Nagel's account, does not exist.

However, the intelligent man's 'non-existence' appears to differ in degree to the annihilation of a person's existence that results from death. Suppose that several years after the brain injury occurred, modern medicine developed an operation that would restore the mental reduction the intelligent man underwent. Given the operation, his brain would be restored to its previous high-level brain function. In which case, the physical brain would be identical to how it was prior to the injury, and according to Nagel's theory of personal identity, the person who emerges from the operation is not the childlike person, but the intelligent man. So the intelligent man, post injury, must still exist in some way, as it is conceptually possible for the intelligent man to remerge in space and time if his brain injury can be healed. The man would then be informed of his accident, and would suffer the consequent feelings of pain for the years he was deprived of as an intelligent person, and pleasure in being healed. In which case, there would be a precise time—the time in which he learns of his injury—that the mental reduction was bad for the *intelligent man*.

The issue involved with the intelligent man example, and its relevance to the evil that consists in death, concerns the fact that the

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<sup>52</sup> Nagel (1980) 40-49.

intelligent man must continue to persist in some way, as it is conceptually possible for the intelligent man to remerge as the identical person he was prior to the brain injury; whereas with the non-existence in the case of death, this is conceptually *impossible* because death is the total annihilation of a person's existence. My example demonstrates that it is at least *possible* for the intelligent man to learn of his misfortune. The case of the intelligent man, viewed in this way, is then no different from the case of betrayal.

Given my example, the intelligent man's non-existence post injury is analogous to a person who enters into a coma. It could be the case that the person will never wake up and never learn of the misfortune that resulted from the coma, but it is at least *possible* that the person could wake up and learn of the misfortune because in the case of the coma, and in the case of the intelligent man, a subject of *possible* experience still remains in some degree. Whereas with the case of death, a person's existence is completely annihilated, and it is *impossible* for one to ever learn of the misfortune (if there is one) death resulted in. So it remains unclear exactly how the subject whose life has ended, and whose possibilities no longer exist, can be deprived when the grounds for the deprivation, and therefore the evil, cannot be located.

There are additional unresolved problems with this account. Though not explicit from Nagel's explanation of the evil that occurs with the intelligent man and the person who is betrayed, it appears as though he wants to claim that there is not a precise time in which a subject's death harms him.<sup>53</sup> Nagel states, 'There are goods and evils which are irreducibly relational; they are features of the relations between a person, with spatial and temporal boundaries of the usual sort, and circumstances which may not coincide with him in either space or time.'<sup>54</sup> So from this explanation, it appears as though Nagel claims that since a person's death

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<sup>53</sup> Fischer (1993) 26-27 interprets Nagel's position to hold that it is indeterminate when some evils harm a person, and death is one of these types of evils.

<sup>54</sup> Nagel (1970) 77-78.

occurs in space and time, a person's actual death harms him even though the person no longer exists in space and time. And while death is indeed an evil of deprivation for the person who died, there is no precise time at which that person, from his point of view, is harmed by his death. This explanation would perhaps be suitable if it were possible to locate the subject's possibilities that are allegedly harmed by death, but as demonstrated above, this cannot be done. Therefore, Nagel cannot provide a clear solution to how a person is harmed by his death, since the subject of the harm, his features, cannot be located in space and time if he no longer exists once dead. Appealing to when death is an evil for the person who died cannot help us locate the features of the person who is harmed by death, because there is no determinate time in which a person's death is bad for him. The argument that a person's concrete death harms some *abstract* features of a person who no longer exists at an *indeterminate* time comes across as dangerously vague.

More importantly, in the case of the betrayal (and the intelligent man), we can at least conceive how it may be possible for the man who is betrayed to regard his betrayal as something bad for *him* at a precise time, because he exists as a subject of possible experience at the time in which the betrayal occurred. And if the man who is betrayed never learns of his betrayal, then it may be the case that the betrayal was never bad for him, as there is no point in which his life, from *his point of view*, is worse off for *him* from the act of betrayal. So if the man never learns of the betrayal, then it is never bad for him from his point of view, even though from the outside, others may be able to say that he is worse off. But in the case of death, since a person's existence is completely annihilated, it is impossible for the person who died to regard his death as bad for *him* at a precise time. Therefore, the betrayal example (and the intelligent man) merely demonstrates how we, from an external point of view, could regard a person's death as bad for the person who died, but it does not resolve how the person who dies could regard *his* death as bad for *him* at some precise



time. Thus, Nagel's examples and the deprivation account cannot solve the 'who' and 'when' puzzles, and without doing so, his theory cannot pose a threat to the Epicurean arguments against the badness of death.

Furthermore, even without these puzzles, there are issues internal to Nagel's deprivation theory. For example, we can conceive of death as a welcomed end once life is no longer worth living. But Nagel claims that death, whether it occurs early or late in a person's life, is *always* an evil, because a person's death *always* deprives that person's future possibilities of the goods of life. As Nagel puts it, 'death, no matter how inevitable, is an abrupt cancellation of indefinitely extensive possible goods.'<sup>55</sup> For Nagel, life is intrinsically good, and death is necessarily bad even when life is no longer worth living. Therefore, to refute Nagel's argument we can argue against the claim that life is *indefinitely* good. This can be done, as will be explained in Chapter Four, by demonstrating that an indefinite life, or an immortal life, would *not* be a good or valuable human life. But one need not go through this trouble, as all that is needed to refute Nagel's account is to show *one* case where life is no longer good. Finally, there is the additional issue of addressing Lucretius' symmetry argument. If death is a time at which a person is deprived of the goods of life, then the equal state of non-existence, one's prenatal non-existence must also deprive one. There will be more on the symmetry argument in what follows. But for our present purposes, it is sufficient to note that the deprivation account, as described by Nagel, leaves several pressing issues unresolved, and therefore cannot be considered as a plausible objection to the Epicurean position that death is not bad for the person who died.

## 2.2 Revised Betrayal Case

There have been several defenders of the deprivation account who attempt to provide a more coherent analogy between the evil of betrayal and the evil of death. To resolve the 'who' and 'when' puzzle of the evil of death,

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<sup>55</sup> Nagel (1970) 80.

the defenders of Nagel's deprivation account put forth an example of a person who is betrayed or harmed outside of the boundaries of his categorical state of the moment, and present an additional condition to the example so that it is *impossible* for that person to learn of his misfortune.<sup>56</sup> One such example is offered by Fischer,<sup>57</sup> who imagines a case where a man is betrayed behind his back by his good friends. What distinguishes this example from Nagel's example, is that one of the friends involved with the betrayal takes it upon himself to prevent the man who was the subject of the betrayal from ever learning about it. Given the interference of the friend, it is deemed *impossible* for the man who is betrayed to learn of the betrayal, whereas as we saw on Nagel's account, it is *possible* for the subject of the betrayal to learn of his betrayal.

Most of us have encountered this difficult task of preventing a loved one from learning of some distressing news, and it is not uncommon for the task to fail despite our best efforts. But leaving aside whether it is truly *impossible* for the person who is betrayed to learn of the betrayal, there remains the same issue Nagel faced, which concerns the fact that the person who is betrayed still continues to exist.<sup>58</sup> There is therefore an obvious reply as to *who* is harmed by the betrayal, as there still remains a *subject* that exists in space in time for the evil to befall.<sup>59</sup> Whereas in the case of death, this is simply not true as death is the annihilation of the

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<sup>56</sup> See Hetherington (2001), Fischer (1997, 2006), Nozick (1997), and McMahan (1988).

<sup>57</sup> Fischer (2006) 359.

<sup>58</sup> In response to this objection, Fischer imagines another example where a mother's daughter dies. The death of her daughter is considered to be a harm for the mother, though the mother does not know of her daughter's death, and the mother dies before she can ever learn of her daughter's death. In this case, it is *impossible* for the mother to learn of her misfortune as she dies before the news of her daughter's death reaches her. Nonetheless, her daughter's death can only be a misfortune for the mother if the mother is alive at the time at which her daughter dies. Provided that the mother exists at the time at which the evil occurred, there is a clear answer to who is harmed by the evil. This example, therefore, cannot be analogous to the evil we are concerned with in death as it involves a subject who continues to exist (though only for a brief period of time) when the evil occurs. See Fischer (2006) 360.

<sup>59</sup> Nussbaum and Suits press the discontinuity of the analogy between the revised case of betrayal and the case of death, locating the fault in the remaining subject who could be the subject of the harm of betrayal. See Nussbaum (1994) 811-812 and Suits (2001) 69-84.

subject's existence, and it thus remains unclear how to resolve the issue of *who* is harmed by death if death is indeed an evil of deprivation.

The considerations of the examples provided by Nagel and his defenders, fail to present a plausible analogy to the evil of deprivation death allegedly inflicts on the person who dies. Even in the revised betrayal case, the person who is allegedly harmed by betrayal exists at the time in which the act occurred. Accordingly, if betrayal is an evil, we can locate the subject of the misfortune of betrayal in space and time, whereas in the case of death, we cannot locate the subject, or his possibilities, as the subject (along with all of his features) cease to exist once dead. Therefore, we have yet to arrive at a connection between badness and non-existence, as we cannot identify a plausible solution to the 'who' and 'when' puzzle. If these puzzles cannot be resolved, then the Existence Condition cannot be rejected, and thus (EA) and (SA) must also hold.

### **2.3 A Sophisticated Deprivation Account**

Fred Feldman, sharing Nagel's intuition that death is an evil of deprivation, offers a new approach to the deprivation account by seeking a connection between badness and non-existence through a consideration of different possible worlds. He claims that we can arrive at solution to the puzzles pertaining to how, who, and when death is bad for the person who dies if we evaluate the dead person's overall life value in the actual world in which the person died, to the nearest possible world in which that person did not die.<sup>60</sup> Assuming a hedonist axiology, Feldman explains that we can assess the value of a person's life in any possible world by subtracting the amount of experienced pain from experienced pleasure. If, in the nearest possible world where that person did not die, the value of that person's life is higher than in the actual world where he did die, then his *actual death* is bad for *him* as it deprived him of these additional pleasures he would have experienced had he not died.

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<sup>60</sup> Feldman (1991).

Even at this point, we can see a clear advantage in Feldman's deprivation account over Nagel's; Feldman claims that the subject of the harm of death is the *person who died*, and not, as Nagel suggests, some vague possibilities of that person. Additionally, on Feldman's account, death is only an evil if a person's well-being is greater in the nearest possible world where he did not die, but if his well being would have been lower in that nearest possible world (perhaps due to some extreme accident), then that person's actual death would not be bad for him. This allows Feldman to account for the intuition that death may bring a welcomed end to a life that is no longer worth living, whereas Nagel's theory cannot account for this because in all cases of death, death is necessarily an evil.

Feldman holds that the nature of the harm involved with death is indeed one of deprivation as Nagel describes. To explain *how* one may be harmed by deprivation, though one does not experience anything unpleasant from being deprived, Feldman distinguishes between intrinsic and extrinsic harms.<sup>61</sup> An intrinsic harm is precisely the type of harm we identified when discussing Epicurus's hedonism, a harm that is consciously experienced as such through the sensation of pain. An intrinsic harm is a harm in itself. An extrinsic harm, on the other hand, is not a harm that a person experiences or is conscious of, but we can nonetheless claim that a state of affairs is bad for a person all things considered, if that person would have been better off had the state of affairs not occurred. Death then, is not an intrinsic evil since the person dead cannot experience anything painful from being dead. Nonetheless, all things considered, death can still be an evil if the person who died would have been better off in the nearest possible world where he did not die.

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<sup>61</sup> Feldman (1991) 314. For an additional explanation of Feldman's distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic harms, see Kauffman (2004) 244.

Feldman goes on to explain that the ‘Existence Condition’ holds only insofar as we are concerned with intrinsic evils, so a state of affairs can only be intrinsically bad for one if that person exists at the time in which the state of affairs occurs. But it is possible that states of affairs could be *extrinsically* bad for a person without that person necessarily being alive. He explains that the intrinsic goods and bads that befall a person occur within the span of that person’s existence and determine the overall value of that person’s life. Extrinsic goods and bads on the other hand, do *not* factor into the overall value of a person’s life, rather, they are only valued when we consider the overall value of a person’s life between different possible worlds. A person’s death then, according to Feldman’s deprivation account, is *overall* an *extrinsic* bad for him if in the nearest possible world the overall value of that person’s life is greater than in the actual world where that person died. Furthermore, these possible worlds that we consider in relation to a person’s overall life value exist at times in which that person exists in the actual world, as well as times when he does not. The relational value of a person’s overall life between two possible worlds therefore holds eternally as these possible worlds, and their relation to one another, are eternal. Feldman thus resolves another issue concerning the time in which a person’s death is bad for him if that person no longer exists once dead, as he explains that a person’s death is ‘*eternally*’ bad for him; that is, death is an evil before birth, while one is alive, and after one is dead.<sup>62</sup>

Feldman argues, like Nagel, that death is an evil of deprivation of further goods in life. But he is able to distinguish himself from Nagel through identifying the evil of death to be an *extrinsic* evil of deprivation that holds in relation to different possible worlds. Provided this distinction

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<sup>62</sup> Feldman explains that if we were to picture God at the moment of creating an individual, he would have seen prior to creation that one possible world where X dies at t is bad for X when compared to another possible world where X dies after t. According to this explanation, the fact that X is born into the world where X will die at t is *eternally* bad for X as the evil of the time of X’s death was bad for X before X was born, when X is alive, and after X is dead. See Feldman (1991) 321.

between extrinsic and intrinsic evils, as well as the appeal to different possible worlds, Feldman appears to have arrived at a rejection to the Existence Condition when we are concerned with extrinsic evils, which according to him, is precisely the type of evil death consists in. Since Nagel, unable to resolve the ‘when’ and ‘who’ puzzle, could not reject the Existence Condition, Feldman, provides us with a more promising deprivation account as he provides a clear answer to three out of the four puzzles: (how) death, though not experienced as painful, is indeed an evil of deprivation, and it need not be experienced as such because it is an *extrinsic* evil, (when) the extrinsic evil of death holds in the eternal relation between different possible worlds, and death is eternally bad for the person who died, (who) *the person who died* is the subject of the extrinsic evil of death that eternally deprives him. Thus, in providing an explicit answer to the ‘how’, ‘when’, and ‘who’ puzzles, Feldman is in a good position to object to the Epicurean arguments.

There is, however, one remaining puzzle Feldman must address with his account for how death is an evil, as he must either explain why the time of our death can deprive us while the time of our birth does not, or explain how prenatal and posthumous non-existence are both times in which we are deprived. In the next section, I present Feldman’s response to Lucretius’ symmetry argument, which reveals that his solution to the timing puzzle—one is eternally harmed by the deprivation of death—is as implausible as Nagel’s ‘no time’ solution.

#### **2.4 Feldman’s Reply to Lucretius**

Feldman has provided us with a version of the deprivation account that objects to (EA), and explains that a subject’s current existence is not a necessary condition for an evil to be extrinsically bad for that subject. Although he appears to have arrived at a way around the ‘Existence Condition’, the deprivation argument cannot be seriously considered as a plausible objection to the Epicurean conclusion that death *cannot* be bad

for the one who died without first addressing Lucretius' symmetry argument. To consistently hold that our future non-existence may be an extrinsic evil of deprivation for us, Feldman must explain how the equal state of non-existence, or past non-existence, may also be an extrinsic evil of deprivation.

The non-existence that follows from death is an equal state of non-existence that occurred prior to birth. The symmetry argument points out that we do not regard our prenatal non-existence as bad for us, and therefore, we should not regard the equal state of non-existence, our posthumous non-existence, as bad for us.<sup>63</sup> Any defender of the deprivation account, or supporter of the view that death is an evil for the one who died, must explain how two apparently equal states can be regarded with asymmetrical attitudes. One must therefore propose an argument for the asymmetry between prenatal and posthumous non-existence, or explain how our prenatal non-existence can be bad for us. This defense must also account for why our prenatal non-existence was bad for us, even though we do not typically regard it as such.

Feldman opts for the latter, and attempts to explain how a late birth, like an early death, can be an evil of deprivation. He imagines the life of Claudette who was born in 1950 and dies prematurely in 2000 as a result of some accident. In the nearest possible world where Claudette did not die, she would have lived an additional happy 35 years. Her actual death then, is a misfortune for Claudette, all things considered, as it has deprived her of 35 pleasurable years. Holding Claudette's death span constant, Feldman considers the possibility of Claudette suffering the equal misfortune of not being born 35 years earlier. If in the nearest possible world Claudette would have enjoyed 35 more happy years in the beginning of her life, then it would be a misfortune for Claudette, all things considered, that she was not born in 1915. Feldman explains that in

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<sup>63</sup> Lucretius (1995) 969-972. For further explanation regarding this argument, refer to the discussion in section 1.5 of this thesis.

each case, ‘the deprivation of 35 happy years of life is a bad thing, whether these years would have occurred before the date at which Claudette was in fact born, or after the date on which she in fact died.’<sup>64</sup>

In the above explanation, Feldman describes how one’s prenatal non-existence can deprive one in the same way in which we might claim that one’s posthumous non-existence deprives one. However, in the explanation, we are asked to consider a period of deprivation that either occurs before Claudette’s birth or after Claudette’s death. There is therefore a clear answer as to *when* the deprivation occurred: in the case of an early death, Claudette is deprived of 35 happy years during her posthumous non-existence, and in the case of a late birth, Claudette is deprived of 35 happy years during her prenatal non-existence. In offering a reply to Lucretius, Feldman thus identifies a precise time at which Claudette is deprived, and if we can locate the period of her deprivation, then it becomes unclear why she would be harmed by this deprivation eternally, and not just for the 35 years that her late birth or early death deprived her of pleasant experiences.<sup>65</sup>

Recall that any view which purports that death is an evil for the person who died must identify the time at which a person’s death is bad for that person, which is an interesting philosophical puzzle because once a subject’s death occurs, that subject no longer exists. In Feldman’s words, the question we are seeking to resolve is the following: ‘precisely when is *d* [death] bad for [Claudette]?’ We evaluate whether *d* is bad for Claudette when we consider the nearest possible world where Claudette

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<sup>64</sup> Feldman (1991) 323.

<sup>65</sup> There is an additional issue concerning Feldman’s response to Lucretius and his claim that one is eternally harmed by death. Feldman has demonstrated, against Lucretius, that our prenatal and posthumous non-existence are symmetrical periods throughout which we may be deprived of good experiences. To hold this account however, he must explain why we do not regard our past non-existence as bad for us if it is possible that this period deprived us. To explain the asymmetry in our attitudes towards symmetrical states, Feldman explains that we tend to think that the past is fixed while the future is still open. So the fact that our previous non-existence deprived us does not trouble us because our past is fixed, yet we are deeply troubled by our future non-existence because we believe future affairs to be undetermined. But if our future deaths are eternally an evil for us—an evil even before we are born—then it cannot be true that the future is still open.



did not die. If in that nearest possible world in which  $d$  does not occur, Claudette's life value is higher as she would have lived an additional pleasurable 35 years, then Claudette's death is bad for her all things considered as her death deprived her of 35 happy years. So when we ask precisely *when*  $d$  is bad for Claudette, provided the consideration of possible worlds, we can reconstruct our question as follows: 'Precisely *when* is it the case that the value for [Claudette] of the nearest possible world in which  $d$  occurs is lower than the value for her of the nearest possible world in which  $d$  does not occur?'<sup>66</sup> Feldman's original response to this question was 'eternally'. However, Claudette's life value is equal in each possible world until the time of  $d$ , and therefore, it is simply not true that  $d$  is *eternally* bad for Claudette. Feldman then, does not answer the question of *precisely* when  $d$  is bad for Claudette, as there is a particular time at which Claudette's value in each possible world diverges.

Feldman would most likely respond to the inconsistency by explaining that when we say Claudette's death or birth is an evil of deprivation for her eternally, we are making a claim on the *overall* value of Claudette's life. The fact that Claudette will die 35 years prematurely is *eternally* an evil for the *overall* value of her life. When explained in this way, it follows that Claudette's early death is eternally bad for her. Nonetheless, Feldman has neglected to answer his own question pertaining to *precisely when*  $d$  (or *birth*) is bad for Claudette. That is, there is a *precise* time when the value of Claudette's life in the actual world where  $d$  occurs is lower than the possible world where  $d$  does not occur. The same is true of evils that befall Claudette throughout her lifespan. When we say that it was an evil for Claudette that she was not accepted at Harvard University in 1968, we ordinarily describe her rejection as an evil for her at the time at which it occurred, in 1968. If we consider the nearest possible world where Claudette was accepted into Harvard in 1968, and

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<sup>66</sup> Feldman (1991) 321. The above construction of this question is a direct quote from Feldman, but for the sake of clarity, I have replaced Feldman's use of 'Lindsay' with 'Claudette'.

this acceptance lead to several significant pleasurable experiences, then the precise time at which the value of Claudette is lower in the actual world than the nearest possible world is in 1968. We can still describe this evil as eternally bad for Claudette when considering her overall life value, but that is a different question than Feldman's question of *precisely* when Claudette's life value is lower in the actual world than the possible world where this event did not occur. Feldman therefore has not solved the puzzle of *precisely* when a subject's death is bad for that subject. And when we are concerned with how death can be an evil, the *when* question concerns *precisely when* death is bad for the one who died, not *when* the overall value of a subject's life is bad for that subject.

Since Feldman holds Claudette's birth date constant in the comparison between possible worlds, the actual world where Claudette will die prematurely and in the nearest possible world where she will not die prematurely, Claudette's life value is the same between the two worlds throughout Claudette's actual lifespan, and they do not diverge until the precise time at which Claudette dies a premature death in the actual world. Therefore, the precise time at which Claudette's premature death is bad for her cannot be eternally because her premature death was not bad for her before or during her life. So Claudette's premature death in the actual world must be bad for her at the precise time at which her life value in the actual world is lower than her life value in the nearest possible world where she does not die. However, once Claudette's life value between the two worlds diverges, Claudette no longer exists in the actual world, and accordingly, she cannot be the subject of the evil of her death when her death comes about. It is also implausible to hold that Claudette is the subject of her premature death before it occurs, because there is no point at which her overall life value in the actual world is less than the overall life value in the nearest possible world while she is alive, and therefore, her premature death in the actual world cannot affect her overall life value in

that world. Thus, Feldman's sophisticated deprivation account cannot resolve the 'who' or 'when' puzzle.

Although Feldman's sophisticated deprivation account, in providing an answer to all four of the puzzles, appeared to have a large advantage over Nagel's account, upon closer consideration to his solution to the 'when' puzzle, it is clear that it is implausible to hold that a person is eternally harmed by his death because any harm that results in a person's death would occur, as the Epicureans pointed out, at a time at which that person no longer exists, and therefore, cannot be the subject of the misfortune of death. So Feldman's claim that a person's death is eternally an extrinsic evil for that person, is really just a sophisticated way of saying, as Nagel does, that a person is harmed by death outside of the boundaries of his life at an indeterminate time. Therefore, the suggestion that a person is 'eternally' harmed by death is just as vague as Nagel's suggestion that death is an evil for the person who died at an indeterminate time. Neither reply can locate a precise time at which there is a clear subject that death harms, and without doing so, the deprivation theorists cannot draw a connection between badness and non-existence. Thus, the deprivation account cannot reject the Existence Condition, and the Epicurean arguments must hold against their proposed objections.

While the consideration of the deprivation theorist's responses to the first three puzzles yielded that we cannot account for when death is a harm for the person who died, and therefore, the deprivation theorists cannot provide a convincing objection to (EA) and (SA), we can still benefit from considering the deprivation theorist's responses to the fourth puzzle, which concerns Lucretius' (SA). If we can account for why we hold asymmetrical attitudes towards two seemingly symmetrical states, then we may be able to explain why we tend to attach a value to death, even though we cannot account for any value death may have once it occurs.

## 2.5 Additional Responses to The Symmetry Argument

This chapter has considered various deprivation accounts, none of which were able to provide a solution to the three pressing issues pertaining to how, who, and when death is an evil of deprivation for the person who died. It has therefore been determined that there are several weaknesses that are internal to this position, and although the conclusions of the argument appear to address our natural intuition that death is bad, it remains unclear how one can be harmed by one's own death when this harm befalls one. Although the deprivation account cannot be seriously considered as a plausible objection to the Epicureans for the reasons provided above, given the popularity of the view that death is indeed an evil, it will be worthwhile to briefly consider additional replies to Lucretius' symmetry argument. A closer consideration of the discussions pertaining to this argument will explain that our belief that death is bad for us may not have anything to do with death being necessarily bad, but could result from a quirk in the development of our psychology.

Recall that Lucretius' symmetry argument is grounded in the premise that we do not regard our past non-existence as bad for us, in fact, we tend to think that the time prior to our birth has no meaning for us at all. Nagel suggests that the asymmetry in our attitudes towards our past and future non-existence result from a metaphysical and conceptual asymmetry between these two allegedly equal states of non-existence. Though he does not deny that the time before a person's birth and the time after a person's death are respectively times when that person does not exist, Nagel claims that it is logically possible for a person's death to occur later, yet it is logically *impossible* for a person to have been born any earlier. According to a metaphysical assumption regarding the essentiality of the time in which we are born,<sup>67</sup> Nagel claims that it is

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<sup>67</sup> This metaphysical assumption appears to be based on Kripke's genetic origins thesis which claims that a person is born from a particular fertilized egg. If this thesis holds, then the identity of the person who is born from that particular egg depends on the time at

logically *impossible* for the time of a person's birth to result in any loss for that person. He explains, 'aside from the brief margin permitted by premature labor, he *could* not have been born earlier: anyone born substantially earlier than he was would have been someone else.'<sup>68</sup> Our previous non-existence then, cannot be any loss for us because the precise time at which we are born determines our identity. This therefore explains why we hold asymmetrical attitudes towards our past and future non-existence.

This metaphysical assumption regarding the essentiality of our origins is however, a controversial metaphysical claim, and it is insufficient to explain the asymmetry in our attitudes for anyone who does not accept this assumption. Nagel himself is unsatisfied with this explanation. He points out that 'Lucretius's argument still awaits an answer' because this metaphysical assumption 'is too sophisticated to explain the simple difference between our attitudes to prenatal and posthumous non-existence.'<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, even if it is logically impossible for us to have been born any earlier does not necessarily entail that we cannot *regret* this logical impossibility. It may be the case that I have a desire that could only have been fulfilled if I were born 30 years earlier, and the logical impossibility of my being born earlier will have nothing to do with the fact that I regret not being able to fulfill this desire.<sup>70</sup> It therefore remains unclear, according to Nagel's account, why

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which the egg originated, and all the causal events that led to the development of that particular egg at that particular time. For more on this thesis see Kripke (1980) 56.

<sup>68</sup> Nagel (1970).

<sup>69</sup> Nagel (1993) footnote no. 3, 370.

<sup>70</sup> Nagel elaborates on the insufficiency of his argument by considering a suggestion offered by Robert Nozick who explains that it is logically possible for individuals to come into existence earlier even if the genetic origins thesis holds. Nozick imagines that people develop from individual spores that exist indefinitely prior to one's birth, and upon discovering a way to prematurely hatch these spores, we could logically conceive of ourselves existing significantly earlier than our actual birth. Provided this suggestion, the possibility of having been born earlier appears to be equally as possible as living forever. In either situation, it is not *logically* impossible to be born earlier or live forever, yet it remains unclear how these abstract possibilities could be made concrete. See Nagel (1993). Unless there is some recent invention that I am unaware of, it remains physically

we hold asymmetrical attitudes towards our past and future non-existence as it is conceptually possible to conceive of how our past non-existence could deprive us in the same way our future non-existence allegedly deprives us.

Derek Parfit suggests that this emotional asymmetry can be explained in terms of a psychological bias towards the future. According to him, our prenatal and posthumous non-existence are equal states of non-existence. Yet due to the way our psychology has developed, we regard our past non-existence with indifference and regard our future non-existence with alarm. This argument is developed in his famous hospital case in which we are asked to consider whether we would prefer to have some intense pain inflicted on us in the past or a less severe pain in the future, even though, once this pain has occurred, our memories will be wiped of this painful event.<sup>71</sup> Parfit argues that given this choice, he would prefer to have suffered a greater amount of pain in the past than suffer a small amount of pain in the future. This preference was not grounded in a calculation over quantity of pain; instead, it was determined by his attitude towards past and future experiences. According to this account, prenatal non-existence may have been a period in which we were harmed, but since it was in the past, we did not regard it as such because we have developed an evolutionary bias towards future experiences.

Bruekner and Fischer argue that Parfit's temporal asymmetry towards past and future pains is irrelevant to Lucretius' symmetry argument because the bias towards the future is grounded in *experienced* pains. They nonetheless offer a defense of the deprivation theory and apply Parfit's emotional bias towards the future to experienced pleasures in order to form a reply to Lucretius.<sup>72</sup> It is suggested that our attitude

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impossible for us to live forever or be born earlier. If it is possible to regret our mortality as the deprivation account holds, then it is equally possible to regret the time of our births.

<sup>71</sup> Parfit (1984) 165-166.

<sup>72</sup> Bruekner and Fischer (1993) 221-229.

towards experienced pleasures is parallel to how Parfit accounts for our attitudes towards experienced pains: we are indifferent towards past experienced pleasures and look forward to our future experienced pleasures. Our prenatal and posthumous non-existence both deprive us of experienced pleasures, but we only regard our posthumous non-existence as bad for us because we care about future pleasurable experiences yet we are indifferent towards the past pleasures that we could have experienced if we were born earlier. Given this, the asymmetry in our attitudes towards our past and future non-existence is explained.

There are several pressing issues with this suggested reply to Lucretius that are not limited to, but certainly apply to the objections already raised when discussing Nagel's deprivation argument. This argument is grounded in the assumption that what holds out for one are future pleasures, and it has already been pointed out that this is not always the case. But the relevant point to consider is whether any of these above replies to Lucretius can account for why we regard our non-existence to be an evil for us. The only plausible explanation for why we regard our future non-existence as an evil for us is due to our psychology, and is insufficient to yield the conclusion that death is indeed an evil. Furthermore, our psychological bias towards future pains and pleasures appears to be irrational. Even Parfit himself concludes that this asymmetrical attitude is bad for us, and we would be better off regarding the past and future with symmetrical attitudes. He explains, 'in giving us this bias, Evolution denies us the best attitude to death.'<sup>73</sup> The common intuition that death is bad for us, given the above considerations, appears to be best explained by our psychological developments, and not from any moral claims regarding the nature of death. The reason why we tend to think that death is bad for us is perhaps not because death actually harms us, but because we have an irrational bias towards future affairs.

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<sup>73</sup> Parfit (1984) 177.

Lucretius's argument in fact, appears to strengthen in light of these considerations. If this psychological bias towards the future is irrational, and we regard our past non-existence with indifference, then Parfit's emotional asymmetry should tell us that it is irrational to regard our future non-existence as bad for us. In our considerations of the anti-Epicurean position, we have found that the deprivation theorist cannot provide a plausible rejection to the Epicurean conclusions as it remains unclear how and when an event can be said to harm a person if that person no longer exists at the time in which the event takes place. Without offering a coherent objection to (EA), we cannot explain why we regard death to be an evil, as it remains questionable as to whether death is in fact bad for the person who died. From our discussion of the symmetry argument, we have seen that it could be possible that we hold death to be an evil, even though we do not have any cause to believe it is indeed an evil, because we have a bias in our attitude towards past and future affairs. If Parfit is right, then what some people regard to be the greatest evil could be motivated entirely by a default in the development in our psychology.

In this chapter, I have offered a defense of the Epicurean arguments against the evil of death from the objections posed by the deprivation theorists. It has been determined that death, when it occurs, cannot be bad for the person who died because it remains to be shown how and when a person can be harmed without that person being alive. In the next chapter, I will consider a position that negotiates a middle path between the Epicureans and the anti-Epicureans, and determine whether we may have good reasons to regard death as bad for us *before* death occurs.



### 3

## A Middle Ground

In Chapter One, I presented the Epicurean position on the nature of death, which holds that death cannot be an evil for the one who dies because existence is a necessary condition for any evil that may befall one, and death is the privation of existence. In the previous chapter, I presented the counter-arguments that deprivation theorists raise against the Epicureans, which claim that a person can be the subject of evils that occur outside of the boundaries of a person's location in space and time. According to this anti-Epicurean argument, death is an evil for the person who died because it deprives that person from additional pleasurable experiences with the goods of life. Since the deprivation theorists could not account for when a person could be the subject of an evil at a time when he no longer exists, and thus could not provide an objection to the Existence Condition, it was determined that neither death, nor the state of being dead, can be an evil for the reasons provided by this anti-Epicurean position. In this chapter, I consider a position that negotiates a middle path between the Epicureans and the deprivation theorists, with the suggestion that death can be an evil, but need not be.

In the 'Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality',<sup>74</sup> Bernard Williams proposes a middle ground between the Epicureans and the deprivation theorist, and proposes that a person's death can be bad for the person who dies if it would prevent the satisfaction of certain desires or pursuits. Against the deprivation account, Williams suggests that death is not an evil on account of what it deprives people of, but it can be an evil in what it *prevents*. For him, the state of being dead is not an evil, as he agrees with the Epicureans that it is irrational to regard a

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<sup>74</sup> Williams (1973) 82-100.

period of non-existence as a loss, but he suggests, against the Epicureans, that it is rational to regard the termination of life as an evil if it prevents one from fulfilling one's present desires.<sup>75</sup>

This chapter begins by presenting Williams' objections to the Epicureans, and then considers whether or not his argument that death can be an evil of prevention can avoid the complications of the anti-Epicurean deprivation account. I suggest that Williams provides rational grounds on which death can be regarded as an evil, yet the position that death is an evil for the person who dies remains problematic as there is no-one for whom death is bad for once it occurs. The remainder of the chapter attempts to account for how the fact that we will die could be rationally regarded as an evil, even though we cannot be the subjects of an evil once death occurs.

### **3.1 Against the Epicureans**

Thus far, we have considered objections to the Epicurean arguments where the point of contention lies in a period of non-existence, which is allegedly an evil of the loss of life. Williams finds the Epicurean position that death cannot be bad for the person who died implausible, not because of what one may lose out on once dead, but because of what is good in life that one's death may prevent. He finds the Epicurean position contradictory because it holds that there are good things in life, and that life is intrinsically good. If this is held as true, then it cannot be the case that the finitude of life is a matter of indifference, as life's being finite must prevent some pleasurable experiences with the goods in life.

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<sup>75</sup> Luper (1987) and Furley (1986) propose an argument similar to Williams' argument that death is an evil of prevention. For Luper, death is an evil because it thwarts one's desires. Furley does not argue that death is necessarily an evil, but he raises an objection to the Epicureans and suggests that it *is* rational to fear death, as the fear is the result of one's fear that one's present desires and pursuits will become meaningless and vain if death occurs before they can be satisfied. I believe that Williams provides the strongest middle ground position as he account for a disutility in categorical desires that provides the grounds to regard death as an evil. For this reason, as well as Williams' argument against immortality (which is presented in Chapter Four), I present the middle ground position between the Epicureans and the deprivation theorists in relation to Williams.

Recall that in Chapter One it was explained that the Epicureans held *ataraxia*, the state of tranquility, to be the highest pleasure one can achieve in life.<sup>76</sup> Given *ataraxia*, it is admittedly true that the Epicureans held there to be good things in life. From the hedonist argument, it was also determined that all goods and bads in life were experienced as such through the sensation of pleasure and pain. Since death is the privation of experience, (HA) concludes that death can be neither good nor bad for the person who died as it cannot be experienced as such.

Williams finds the Epicurean argument that death is nothing to us to contradict their claim that there are good things in life, and that conscious pleasurable experiences with the prizes of life are good for an individual. However, it is not inconsistent for the Epicureans to hold that life is good, and that death is a matter of indifference because when we are alive we are subjects of possible experience, and can have conscious enjoyment with the goods of life. Death, on the other hand, is the privation of experience, and therefore the privation of the means by which the prizes of life may be enjoyed.<sup>77</sup> Nonetheless, Williams claims that if there are good things in life, and if conscious enjoyment with the prizes of life is good for an individual, then it cannot be true that death is a matter of indifference, as more conscious enjoyment with the goods of life must be better for a person than less enjoyment. So death, the termination of a person's conscious experience of the goods in life, must be an evil as it denies one from further pleasurable experiences with the goods of life.

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<sup>77</sup> Luper (1987) finds the Epicurean position particularly troubling for the very reason that if death is truly nothing to them, then it cannot be the case that life is good, as one must be indifferent towards whether or not one will continue to live or die at any moment in time. Against this criticism, it is *not* inconsistent for the Epicureans to be indifferent towards death and not towards life since living persons—as sentient beings—are capable of pleasurable experiences with the goods of life, but persons are non-sentient and unable to have any pleasurable experiences in death. There is more on this to follow, but for the present purposes, it is sufficient to note that the Epicureans would prefer living to not living while one is still striving to reach the highest good, *ataraxia*. For a detailed defense of the Epicureans against this criticism, see Rosenbaum (1989).

Williams focuses his criticisms on the Epicurean position by considering one of Lucretius' passages on the nature of death. In the following passage, Lucretius explains that a prolonged life does not affect the amount of time a person is dead:

And long life won't allow us to pluck out  
One moment from our span beyond the grave  
That we might spend a shorter time in death.  
Survive this generation or the next—  
Nevertheless eternal death awaits,  
Nor will the man who died with the sun today  
Be nonexistent for less time than he  
Who fell last month—or centuries ago.<sup>78</sup>

Lucretius explains that once death occurs, the length of person's life—whether full or short—is irrelevant, because everyone is dead for the same amount of time, eternally. From this passage, Williams takes Lucretius to hold that a life cut short from a premature death is equally as valuable as a full life, and that one might as well die earlier rather than later. He believes this undermines the Epicurean claim that life is valuable, and conscious experiences with the values of life are good for individuals. Williams explains, 'if the *praemia vitae* [prizes of life] are valuable', and if we assume, as the Epicureans do, that conscious experience is a necessary condition for enjoyment of the *praemia vitae* to be good for a person, then 'longer enjoyment with them is better than shorter.'<sup>79</sup> Williams explains that, all things being equal, longer conscious enjoyment with the goods of life must result in a more valuable life for a person than a life that has fewer enjoyment with the goods of life. And from this he concludes, 'it will not be true that to die earlier is all the same as to die later, nor that death is never an evil',<sup>80</sup> because a longer life with more pleasurable experiences with the goods of life, must be a life more valuable than one with less pleasurable experiences.

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<sup>78</sup> Lucretius (1995) 1098-1091.

<sup>79</sup> Williams (1973) 84.

<sup>80</sup> Williams (1973) 84.

Nonetheless, Lucretius' passage does not actually contradict the Epicurean position, as the passage was only making a dialectical argument.<sup>81</sup> It is directed towards those who, like Williams and the deprivation theorist, reject the conclusions of Epicurus' (HA) and (EA)—death cannot be bad for the person who died. Therefore, when Lucretius explains that a prolonged life will not take away from the amount of time a person spends in death, he is only making a point against his objectors. He points out that even *if* death *did* deprive or deny one from additional goods in life, to prolong life will not spare one this deprivation, because once dead, everyone is dead for the same amount of time. Hence, a premature death and a late death both miss out on the goods of life for the same amount of time: eternity.

However, it would also be a mistake to claim that Lucretius finds a short life to be as valuable as a full life. To reiterate, the claim that there is no difference between an early death and a late death applies only to his dialectical argument. From our discussion of his Banquet Argument in Chapter One, we saw that nature provides us with an appropriate time to die, and to die before or after that time would spoil the values of life.<sup>82</sup> Accordingly, there are good reasons to want to live to the point of reaching life's most valuable state, *ataraxia*, as a life that reaches this point has full possession of the goods of life and is considered more valuable than one that is cut off or extended too far beyond this point. Nonetheless, the fact of death, *simpliciter*, is still nothing to us, because the person whose death occurred before nature's appropriate termination cannot experience anything unpleasant from a life cut short as that person no longer exists.<sup>83</sup> For this reason, Lucretius maintains that it is irrational

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<sup>81</sup> Furley (1986) also points out that Lucretius was only making a dialectical claim and he defends the Epicureans against this objection raised by Williams.

<sup>82</sup> See section 1.4 and Lucretius (1995) 935-939.

<sup>83</sup> Lucretius reiterates that it is irrational to fear death or regard it as something bad for oneself. He explains that oftentimes people regard it as such because they confuse dying with death, and imagine a part of themselves left over to grieve their loss of life. Once it is understood that there is no experience in death as one no longer exists once dead, that

to regard the fact of death as a misfortune in its prospect because doing so only brings with it unnecessary pain, when it is not painful when it occurs. Therefore, since this argument maintains that death *simpliciter* is nothing to us, it is *not* inconsistent for Lucretius and the Epicureans to hold that there are valuable things in life, and that reaching the point where one is in full possession of the *praemia vitae* is preferable to a life that is cut short, or extended well beyond this point.<sup>84</sup>

Williams' misinterpretation of Lucretius' dialectical argument does not, however, affect his positive argument pertaining to the moral implications of the nature of death. His intention behind discussing the consistency of the Epicurean argument was to point out that the Epicureans do take as basic that the consciousness of *praemia vitae* is valuable. Given that premise, Williams argues that it cannot be the case that death is never an evil, because longer conscious enjoyment with *praemia vitae* is better, all things being equal, than shorter enjoyment of *praemia vitae*. Here, Williams shares the same intuition as the deprivation theorists as he believes that death *must* be an evil if it cuts off a person's enjoyment with the good things in life. However, Williams attempts to account for how death can be an evil *without* appealing to claims of deprivation, and instead, looks at what a person's death *prevents* so that one may have good reason to regard one's own death as bad for oneself.

In general, Williams' argument against the Epicureans is motivated by his intuition that pleasurable experiences with the good things in life accumulate over time. So it is not the case, as the deprivation theorists claim, that the state of being dead is an evil of the loss of life; rather, the fact that a person will die is an evil for that person if it prevents him from additional pleasurable experiences. He grounds his argument on the premise that the satisfaction of certain desires is good for an individual,

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recognition should bring with it the correct knowledge that death is not bad for the one who died; death is nothing to us. See Lucretius (1995) 870-890.

<sup>84</sup> I explain this argument and the premises that ground it in more detail in the sections to follow as well as in Chapter Four.

and is the means by which an individual enjoys the good things in life. Given certain desires, it is rational for human beings to plan a future where their desires can be satisfied. It follows that death is one future that would prevent the satisfaction of desires, and should therefore be regarded as an evil.

### 3.2 Categorical Desires

Williams distinguishes between two types of desires that a person's death could prevent, conditional and categorical desires. Conditional desires are such that they are formed around the assumption that one is going to be alive. Conditional desires take the following form: *if* I continue to live, *then* I desire *x*. Suppose that all desires are of this form. If that were true, then when I die, none of my desires would be unfulfilled because I *only* desired things based on the assumption that I was going to continue living. If all desires were conditional on being alive, we could not weigh out whether it is better for me to have lived or died based on desire-satisfaction; therefore, the Epicureans would be right, death is nothing to us.<sup>85</sup>

But Williams claims that it is not the case that all desires are conditional on the assumption that one is going to be alive. He imagines a rational calculation of suicide, where a man weighs out the case for suicide against continuing life.<sup>86</sup> If the man decides to go on living, that desire cannot be *conditional* on his being alive because the desire itself resolves the question of whether he will continue on in life. Such unconditional desires are what he calls '*categorical*' desires and they take the following form: I desire *x*, and plan for a future that enables me to carry out this desire. One such future that would prevent this desire from

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<sup>85</sup> The Epicureans believed that all desires are conditional in this way. They held that one should only desire a pleasurable experience to avoid the unpleasantness of pain. The desire for a pleasurable experience, therefore, is grounded on the assumption that I am alive and want to avoid experiencing pain. See Epicurus (1964) 418 and Lucretius (1995).

<sup>86</sup> Williams (1973) 85-86.

being satisfied is my death; therefore, categorical desires provide me with good reason to not want to die.

Exactly which desires fall under the category of conditional and categorical is somewhat vague in Williams' explanation, but it can be determined that desires are distinguished relative to individuals. The desire to become a schoolteacher may be categorical to some, while others may only possess the desire as a means to occupy time given that they will remain alive, in which case the desire would be conditional. Williams does, however, explain that categorical desires are a condition of a person's happiness. Happiness, according to Williams, 'requires that some of one's desires should be fully categorical, and one's existence itself wanted as something necessary to them.'<sup>87</sup> We can therefore determine that categorical desires play a role in possessing the *praemia vitae*. Moreover, even though these desires are *not* conditional on being alive, they do require one's existence as necessary to satisfying the desire. Williams explains that a person with categorical desires 'wants these things, finds his life bound up with them, and that they propel him forward, and thus they give him a reason for living his life.'<sup>88</sup> Categorical desires, then, have a propulsive character, and drive one forward by providing reasons for continuing on in life. We can therefore determine that these desires give one's life a purpose; that is, categorical desires make a life *meaningful* by providing one's life with a concern and an object of hope for the future.

Given that categorical desires drive one into the future and are good for the individual, we are now equipped to provide Williams' argument against the Epicureans. Williams, under the premise that satisfaction of categorical desires are good for an individual, devises a broadly utilitarian argument for why death *can* be bad for an individual. On a utilitarian standpoint, a disutility can be attached to a situation that

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<sup>87</sup> Williams (1973) 86.

<sup>88</sup> Williams (1981) 14-15.



prevents a person from gaining something that will benefit that person. Since death prevents the satisfaction of categorical desires, a disutility can be attached to death, providing good reason to regard death as an evil. So death is not an evil in itself, it is only an evil in what it may prevent. If there is nothing that death prevents, then death cannot be an evil. The evil of death then, on Williams' account, is not the greatest evil that could befall a person, where the deprivation of life is considered the greatest loss there is. Rather, death is an evil in terms of desire-satisfaction, so it is just as much an evil as any other event that could come about and prohibit the fulfillment of a categorical desire.

This is quite distinct from the other objections raised against the Epicurean arguments that we consider in Chapter Two. We saw that the deprivation theorists held death to be an evil because a person is deprived of the goods of life. On the present account, death is an evil *if and only if* it prevents the agent from satisfying categorical desires. Whereas on one deprivation account as proposed by Nagel, death is *always* an evil because life is always good; accordingly, one need not desire to continue living in order for death to be considered an evil. All that is necessary to refute Nagel's account is to show *one* case where life is no longer good. Feldman's deprivation theory, though death is not always an evil (as it is possible that a person's well being is lower in the nearest possible world where that person did not die) shares with Nagel's theory the view that one need not desire to continue living in order for death to be an evil for the person who died. For Nagel and Feldman, the value of death is derived from the value of life that one loses out on once dead, and one need not desire to continue living for one's death to be bad. Therefore, according to the deprivation account, if death would deprive a person from future goods of life, then that person's death is necessarily an evil, even if that person no longer desires to live and has no rational grounds, from his point of view, to regard his death as bad for him.

Williams, on the other hand, given categorical desires, has an advantage over the deprivation theorists because the value of death is considered in relation to desire-satisfaction. Given an individual's present categorical desires, that individual has some desire that is not contingent on life itself, though life is necessary for the desire to be fulfilled. So if a person has categorical desires, that person has a conscious desire for some future state of affairs, and it is rational for that person to regard anything that would prevent his desires from being fulfilled as something to be avoided and regarded as bad for him. Categorical desires therefore, attach a disutility to anything that would prevent their satisfaction; death is one future state of affairs that would prevent the satisfaction of present categorical desires, and thus, it is rational to regard death as an evil to be avoided. Furthermore, though Williams does not address the symmetry problem himself, categorical desires provide him with a way around the issue as it is clear that one's prenatal non-existence cannot prevent the satisfaction of categorical desires for the very reason that such desires have yet to be born.<sup>89</sup>

Williams' argument however, is not without setbacks of its own. One common objection to his argument concerns that it does not explain *who* is harmed by the misfortune of death.<sup>90</sup> Even if it is rational for a person, given his present categorical desires, to regard his possible death as evil for him, he cannot, once his death occurs, be the subject of the evil of his death as he no longer exists. So Williams must also face the puzzles the deprivation theorist could not resolve, pertaining to 'when' and 'whom' death harms, if death is indeed an evil. Williams is aware of this

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<sup>89</sup> Against this, we could consider a situation where an individual has a categorical desire that could only be satisfied if she were born earlier. In this case, the time of a person's birth could be considered a misfortune. Nonetheless, since that person did not exist prior to her birth, the grounds for her misfortune—her categorical desire—are also non-existence. Therefore, there is no disutility for which the time of birth can be bad for one; and more importantly, there is no one for *whom* an untimely birth can be an evil. The same objection that there is no one for whom a later birth can be an evil for can also be applied to death as I point out in the next paragraph.

<sup>90</sup> See Nussbaum (1994) and Furley (1986).

problem with his position, and acknowledges that it is one that he shares with Nagel (and the other deprivation theorists), yet he does not provide a solution. Consider the following passage where Williams discusses this pressing issue:

[T]he type of misfortune we are concerned with in thinking about X's death is X's misfortune (as opposed to the misfortunes of the state or whatever); and whatever sort of misfortune it may be in a given possible world that X does not occur in it, it is not X's misfortune. They share the feature, then, that for anything to be X's misfortune in a given world, then X must occur in that world. But the Utilitarian-type argument further grounds the misfortune, if there is one, in certain features of X, namely his desires; and if there is no X in a given world, then *a fortiori* there are no such grounds.

By grounding an argument for the evil of death in the fact of death, and not the state itself, Williams avoids the difficulty of explaining how death can be bad for one if one cannot experience it as such. Nonetheless, Williams and Nagel must still address Epicurus' Existence Argument and account for how one may be the subject of harm when one no longer exists. As Williams explains, both his and Nagel's justifying grounds for how the subject of the evil of death is the person who died become irrelevant once X has died, because X's death is the annihilation of X and all of his features. Therefore, a case must be made for how a person, and his features, can be harmed by death *before* the event occurs, or account for an argument that shows how the fact of death can be considered bad in its prospect, yet cannot be an evil in its actual occurrence. From our discussion of the deprivation account, we saw that it is implausible to hold that death is an evil for the person who died *before* death occurs, as it would entail applying something to a person's well-being that does not yet exist. In the next section, to avoid these issues concerned with the timing puzzle, I attempt to make Williams' prevention argument coherent by locating the disutility in the *prospect* of the fact of death and not death itself.

### 3.3 The Prospect of Death

We can make sense of Williams' argument by using a similar train of thought to that provided by Lucretius' Banquet Argument. His argument claimed that there is an appropriate time to die, and to die before or after nature's appropriate termination would result in a less valuable life, even though death itself cannot be bad for the one who dies.<sup>91</sup> If we use this claim that there is an appropriate termination to life, along with Williams' disutility argument, we can make a case for why it is rational to regard the fact that we will die as bad in its *prospect*, yet not in its occurrence. In doing so, we can devise an argument that objects to the Epicurean conclusion that death should be regarded as a matter of indifference, without objecting to their Hedonist and Existence Arguments.

According to Williams, the fact that X will die is bad for X if his death prevents him from satisfying categorical desires. However, the disutility for which X's death is bad for him no longer exists once X ceases to exist. Therefore, X's death cannot be an evil for X *simpliciter*. What we can do, however, is reconstruct Williams' argument that categorical desires provide X with a disutility to rationally regard death as an evil, to claim that the disutility provides X with rational grounds to regard the *prospect* of his death as an evil for *him*. In seeking the badness of the fact of death in its prospect, but not its actualization, we need not explain *who* is harmed by the fact of death. We can therefore account for the disutility categorical desires present death with while these features still exist as justifying grounds to regard the fact of death as an evil, as death is only regarded as such in its *prospect*, and not its occurrence.

Accounting for the badness of the fact of death in its prospect is consistent with Williams' argument because his main intention is to argue against the Epicureans, and establish that more time with the goods of life is better than less. If he can account for that claim with his notion of

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<sup>91</sup> Refer to the discussion of Lucretius' (BA) in section 1.4.

categorical desires, then he can conclude that death should not be taken as a matter of indifference. Williams' intention with categorical desires was to show, against the Epicureans, that a person 'has reason to regard possible death as a misfortune to be avoided, and we, looking at things from his point of view, would have reason to regard his actual death as a misfortune.'<sup>92</sup> On my suggested reconstruction of his account, when X looks forward to the fact that he will die, he can still regard his possible death as a misfortune for him if it prevents him from satisfying his categorical desires. In doing so, that person, given his present categorical desires, attaches a disutility to the *prospect of the fact that he will die*, and therefore he can reasonably regard his inevitable death as an evil for him, if it would occur at a time in which it would prevent the fulfillment of his present categorical desires. Nonetheless, if he did die before satisfying his categorical desires, the fact that he died is not *itself* a misfortune for *him*.

While this reconstruction of Williams' argument seems to closely resemble Lucretius' Banquet Argument, there is one important distinction between the two that justifies the trouble of amending Williams' argument. According to (BA), the fact of death plays an instrumental role in appreciating the values of life. For this reason, it is better to live to the point of possessing the goods of life; however, to die before this point or too long after this point would spoil the values in life. To claim that living *too* long would spoil the values given in life is a strange claim to make. If it is true that there are valuable things in life, would it not be better, as Williams assumes, to have more time and enjoyment with the *praemia vitae*?

The Epicureans would respond to this intuition on the grounds that pleasure is not the type of thing that accumulates over time, so it is not the case that *more* pleasure is better. For the Epicureans, pleasure is measured by rational calculation, so that the highest pleasure, the state of *ataraxia*, is achieved by maximizing pleasure over pain. Pleasure, according to the

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<sup>92</sup> Williams (1973) 88.

Epicureans, is not greater with more conscious enjoyment of the goods of life, so although a longer life may allow one to reach life's most valuable state, this cannot be achieved by length alone, but can only be reached through rational calculation. Epicurus explains, 'unlimited time and finite time contain equal [amounts of] pleasure, if one measures its limits by reasoning' because the intelligent, through rational calculation, 'provided us with the perfect way of life and had no further need of unlimited time'.<sup>93</sup> If one practises the correct rational calculation of maximizing the right pleasures over pain, then, according to the Epicureans, there is no reason why one should not achieve a state of tranquility within the limits of a finite life.

Given Epicurus' explanation that sober calculation produces the highest pleasure, it is evident why the Epicureans believe the highest good can be obtained within the limits of a finite life, but it is not, however, clear why more time with this highest good could not increase the value of an individual's life. But for the Epicureans, *ataraxia* is the highest good where one is in full possession of the *praemia vitae*, and once this state of tranquility is attained, the intrinsic value of a person's life cannot increase because there is no additional value in life that could be enjoyed. As Lucretius' explains, once this highest pleasure is attained, 'no new pleasure is forged for us from drawing out our lives.'<sup>94</sup> It can thus be determined that once a state of tranquility is reached, prolonging life will not bring with it any more value to an individual's life. Therefore, when Lucretius claims in (BA) that it would be a misfortune to die well beyond the point of reaching *ataraxia*, he believes that the value of *ataraxia* would be spoiled, as one will have been in this highest state (where no new pleasure can be obtained) for too long.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Epicurus (1964) XIX, XX.

<sup>94</sup> Lucretius (1955) 1079-1080.

<sup>95</sup> Furley (1986) 82, finds the Epicurean belief that pleasure does not accumulate over time to show that there cannot be any 'greater' pleasure that one may enjoy if one reaches this highest state. However, he claims that we should distinguish 'more' from 'greater',

It is crucial to note that the Epicurean claim that pleasure does not accumulate over time is just a belief, and their texts do not provide any support to make a case for an argument. The premise of Williams' objection to the Epicureans, then, is just a disagreement in belief, which in turn leads to his objection that death can be an evil: pleasure *does* accumulate over time, and given that intuition, death must be an evil in some cases as it prevents one from longer enjoyment of the pleasurable things in life. As I explained, Williams cannot make this strong claim (that the fact that X will die is an evil for X) because there are no features of X that can be harmed once X is dead. With my suggested reconstruction of his argument, however, we can account for the intuition that pleasure accumulates over time and devise an argument which rejects the Epicurean claim that death is a matter of indifference. The claim that pleasure accumulates over time is accounted for, according to my suggested argument, by reference to categorical desires, which provide a disutility for which the *prospect* of the fact that one will die is rationally regarded as an evil. Therefore, we can object to the Epicurean attitude of indifference with my reconstruction of Williams' argument, the Prospect Argument, as follows:

(PA) X desires to continue living through the possession of categorical desires, and X's life is a necessary condition for the satisfaction of such desires. Death is the termination of X's life. Categorical desires attach a disutility to X's possible death if X's death would prevent the satisfaction of categorical desires. Therefore, X has rational grounds to regard the prospect of his death as bad for *him* if and only if his death would prevent the satisfaction of his present categorical desires. Since X does not exist when his actual death occurs, the fact that X will die cannot be bad for X *simpliciter*, but it is rationally regarded as such in its prospect.

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and while it may be irrational to desire a greater pleasure after reaching the highest good, it is not clear why one cannot desire 'more' time with this pleasure. In the next chapter, upon considering the attractiveness of immortality, it is suggested that it is not irrational to desire more of a pleasure even when there is not any new or greater pleasure that one may obtain. However, in concession to Lucretius' (BA), it becomes evident that indefinite time with pleasure may spoil the *human* value of pleasure.

Given (PA), we can now object to the Epicurean claim that death is a matter of indifference and hold that death can rationally be regarded as an evil to be avoided. According to (PA), one rationally desires not to die because one's life is a necessary condition for the satisfaction of one's present categorical desires. So the prospect of death is an evil to be avoided if it would prevent the satisfaction of one's present categorical desires. Therefore, if one possesses categorical desires, one has rational grounds to fear the prospect of one's death and regard it as an evil.

(PA) does not pose any objections to (HA), (EA), and (SA), as it maintains that death and the state of being dead *simpliciter*, cannot be bad for the person who dies. Therefore, it would still be irrational, as the Epicureans claimed, to regard death as an evil because one believes there is something necessarily bad about death and the state of being dead. So the fear of death, on my account, is only rational if it is grounded in a fear that one's desires will not be fulfilled, and it cannot be grounded in any fear about death or the state of being dead itself. (PA) does, however, object to the Epicurean claims pertaining to how death should be regarded while one is alive, and given (PA) we can now claim—against the Epicureans—that death should not necessarily be a matter of indifference, that we have rational grounds to fear death, and that the finitude of life can be bad for us if it prevents the satisfaction of our categorical desires.

### **3.4 Conclusions**

In this chapter we considered Williams' argument, which negotiates a middle path between the Epicureans and the deprivation theorists, with the claim that the state of being dead cannot be bad or deprive the person who died, but the fact of death can be bad for the person who dies if it prevents the satisfaction of that person's categorical desires. We saw that Williams' argument had several advantages over the anti-Epicurean position as construed by the deprivation theorists. Given categorical desires, Williams was able to attach a disutility to death, so death is not



bad because life is necessarily good (as the deprivations theorists claim), but rather, death is bad because one *desires* to continue living. Since one cannot possess categorical desires when one does not exist, Williams has a clear reply to the Symmetry Argument that was not available to the deprivation theorist: death is an evil if it prevents an agent's categorical desires from becoming fulfilled, but the period prior to one's birth cannot prevent the fulfillment of categorical desires as they have yet to have been born.

Even with these clear advantages, Williams' argument could not provide a solution to when death is an evil for the person who died because once death occurs, a person, and his categorical desires, cease to exist. Therefore, the grounds for the misfortune cease to exist when the person dies, and accordingly, there is no such misfortune. Williams' argument accounts for the intuition expressed in Chapter One, that death, as the termination of one's life, has certain implications on the way in which one lives one's life, while the state of being dead does not. To account for Williams' claim that death prevents the satisfaction of categorical desires, as well as my intuition that the fact of death should not be a matter of indifference, I proposed an argument—(PA)—which accounts for how death can be rationally regarded as an evil in its prospect, if it would prevent the satisfaction of one's present categorical desires. Given (PA), we now have an argument which objects to the Epicurean claims that death is a matter of indifference, that it is irrational to fear death, and that there is nothing bad about the finitude of life.

(PA) holds that an agent has good reasons to want not to die so that his categorical desires can be fulfilled, and as long as an agent possesses these desires, death remains a rationally regarded evil to be avoided. So now that we have identified how death, the termination of life, can rationally be regarded as an evil, we may have good reasons, against the Epicureans, to hold that there is something bad about the finitude of life. The following chapter considers whether an infinite life could present an

attractive alternative to a finite life. The relevant point to consider in the next chapter concerns whether the rational grounds for regarding the termination of life as an evil to be avoided can hold indefinitely.

## 4

### *Immortality*

Chapter Three considered Williams' argument on the nature of death, which negotiated a middle path between the Epicureans and the deprivation theorists, with the position that one cannot be deprived of anything once dead, but one's death can be bad for one if it prevents the satisfaction of categorical desires. Against Williams, I claimed that his position cannot plausibly hold that death is an evil *simpliciter*, because once death occurs, a person, and his categorical desires, no longer exist. Therefore, not only is there no-one for whom death is bad, but the grounds of the misfortune—the prevention of categorical desires—cease to exist along with the person who died.

To account for the intuition that categorical desires ground death's badness, I proposed (PA): a disutility can be attached to the prospect of death, so that a person has rational grounds to regard his death as an evil to be avoided, if it would prevent the satisfaction of his present categorical desires. Given (PA), the Epicurean arguments (HA), (EA), and (SA) still hold, as death and the state of being dead, once they occur, cannot be bad for the person who died. However, (PA) offers an objection to the Epicurean claims that death is a matter of indifference, it is irrational to fear death, and life's finitude cannot be bad for us. Since (PA) demonstrates that the prospect of death can be rationally regarded as an evil, we have good reason to believe that our finitude may be bad for us, which puts us in a position to consider if there can be a desirable alternative to the prospective evil of one's death. The purpose of this chapter is to address the following question: if unfulfilled categorical desires provide rational grounds to regard the prospect of death as a misfortune, can immortality provide a desirable alternative to death?

To address this question, I begin by presenting Williams' argument against the desirability of immortality. He claims that even though death *can* be an evil, it *need* not be, because to never die would be a greater evil. To give Williams' argument the most plausible reading, we should interpret his claims regarding the badness of death to imply (PA), and not that death is an evil *simpliciter*; as it was determined, against Williams, that there is no one for whom death can be bad for once it occurs. Although Williams argues against the Epicureans and holds that death can be an evil given the existence of categorical desires, he also claims that immortality cannot be a desirable alternative to the evil death presents, because ultimately, all categorical desires will become fulfilled in an indefinite life. Without those desires, a life will necessarily succumb to boredom and meaninglessness.

This chapter considers Williams' argument against the desirability of immortality, and attempts to account for how an immortal life need not succumb to boredom and meaninglessness as Williams claims. I consider two conceptions of immortality: the first, as proposed by Williams, consists in one person living alone in her immortal condition, and the second conception consists in all persons sharing the condition of being immortal. When discussing these alternative conditions of immortality, the relevant points to consider are whether one person could live a meaningful and sustaining life indefinitely, and whether life itself is indefinitely valuable.

#### **4.1 The Makropulos Case**

Given Williams' argument against the Epicureans and his claim that a prolonged life can give us more time with the goods of life, it appears as though he would be willing to agree with the deprivation theorists on the desirability of living forever. Against Nagel's commitment to the attractiveness of immortality, however, Williams states that an immortal life 'would be a meaningless one,' and 'we could have no reason for living

eternally a human life.’<sup>96</sup> Williams’ rejection of immortality, on the face of things, appears to contradict his claim that a prolonged life is preferable to a shorter life, as more time with life provides one with more pleasurable experiences that result from the satisfaction of categorical desires. But we must keep in mind that for Williams, death is an evil *if and only if* it prevents the satisfaction of categorical desires. If there were an unlimited number of categorical desires, then death would always be an evil for Williams, because all cases of death would always prevent the satisfaction of such desires. Therefore, to reject immortality over the alternative to death, there must be some limit to the number of categorical desires a person can possess.

Williams discusses a fictional character in a play by Karel Čapek (which was later made into an opera by Janaček) to present an argument against the desirability of immortality. This character, Elina Makropulos [EM] consumed an elixir of life invented by her father. At the time of consumption, EM had lived for 42 years, and the elixir ensured that she would remain alive for the next 300 years at her biological age of 42. The elixir allowed her to fulfill the desire of becoming one of the world’s best opera singers, but it did so at the cost of preventing her from feeling real love, as she had to part with so many lovers and children. Upon enduring an extended life of 342 years, EM was given the choice to consume the elixir once again and remain immortal for another 300 years. EM refused to retake the elixir, explaining that ‘in the end it is the same... singing and silence.’<sup>97</sup> As Williams puts it, ‘her unending life has come to a state of boredom, indifference, and coldness.’<sup>98</sup> At the end of the play, the elixir is deliberately destroyed despite the protests of some men, and EM dies.

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<sup>96</sup> Williams (1973) 89.

<sup>97</sup> Williams (1973) 82.

<sup>98</sup> Williams (1973) 82.

Provided the example of [EM], Williams argues that an immortal life will ultimately become an unbearable, meaningless life filled with boredom. He explains,

EM's state suggests at least this, that death is not necessarily an evil...in the more intimate sense that it can be a good thing not to live too long...for it suggests that it was not a peculiarity of EM's that an endless life was meaningless.<sup>99</sup>

From this we can infer two things regarding Williams' argument against immortality. In his argument for how death can be an evil, he claimed that a longer life with more enjoyment of the *praemia vitae* was preferable to one that cuts that enjoyment short. But according to his claims on immortality, we see that there must be a *limit* to the duration of the *praemia vitae* that can be enjoyed. In other words, it is better to live a long life, but not *too* long. When considering his argument against immortality, we must address the issue of why he believes that life is not indefinitely pleasurable despite his claim that pleasure accumulates over time. For, according to (PA), one is only justified in regarding the prospect of death as an evil if one desires pleasurable experiences with the values of life. If the values of life cannot be enjoyed indefinitely as Williams appears to suggest, then immortality cannot be a desirable alternative to the evil of death which (PA) presents implies. What we can also be determined from his explanation of EM, is that he believes meaningfulness to be an *essential* feature of immortality, and not just a feature of EM's case.<sup>100</sup> This is a strong claim for Williams to make because he is asserting that *all* cases of immortality would *necessarily* be meaningless. We now need to address another question: *why* does

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<sup>99</sup> Williams (1973) 83.

<sup>100</sup> EM's immortal life is different from other possible conceptions of immortality, as EM is alone in her predicament. We can conceive of another case of immortality where each person shares the condition of being immortal. According to Williams, both conceptions of immortality would be meaningless. The plausibility of the claim that meaningfulness is an essential feature of immortality is the focus of attention in the latter sections of this chapter.

Williams believe that all infinite lives would necessarily be meaningless lives?

To address why Williams believes that one cannot enjoy the goods of life indefinitely, and why an immortal life would necessarily be a meaningless one, we must first consider Williams' two conditions for warranting the desire for an extended life. As we saw in his argument against the Epicureans, categorical desires provide one with a desire to continue living and to plan for a future in which those hopes can be satisfied. Since death prevents the fulfillment of categorical desires, these desires provide one with good reason to want not to die. So categorical desires, for Williams, together with (PA), form the justifying grounds for regarding death as an evil, as well as wishing for continued existence. If one desires to live beyond one's mortality, then this desire cannot be grounded in some fear of death, it can only be grounded in some hope that an extended existence will allow one to fulfill categorical desires. As Williams puts it, 'since I am propelled forward into longer life by categorical desires, what is promised must hold out some hopes for those desires.'<sup>101</sup>

To assure that one's extended existence allows one to carry out these desires, Williams establishes two conditions that must be met in order to fulfill the anti-Epicurean hope for an extended existence. The first condition holds that 'it should be clearly me who lives for ever.'<sup>102</sup> This condition, which will be referred to as the 'identity condition', states that the person who carries out an extended existence must be identical to the same *particular* individual as the person who desires for an extension of life. The second condition, the 'attractiveness condition',<sup>103</sup> ensures that 'the state in which I survive should be one which, to me looking forward, will be adequately related, in the life it presents, to those aims

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<sup>101</sup> Williams (1973) 91.

<sup>102</sup> Williams (1973).

<sup>103</sup> Fischer's (1994) terminology.

which I now have in wanting to survive at all.’ According to this condition, the future desires and concerns in my immortal life must closely resemble my present ones, so that ‘any image I have of those future desires should make it comprehensible to me how in terms of my character they could be my desires.’<sup>104</sup> The first condition requires continuity of personal identity throughout immortality, and the second condition requires, more specifically, that one person live immortally with a character whose contents resemble those desires and concerns that the person held at the time in which the person desired to be immortal.

#### **4.2 Immortality: A Dilemma**

Given the identity and attractiveness conditions, which Williams holds as necessary to meet the anti-Epicurean hope for extended existence, Williams constructs a dilemma with immortality that can best be explained by referring to EM’s case. According to the attractiveness condition, either EM’s character (her desires, concerns, and interests) remains the same over time, or changes. If her character remains the same throughout her infinite existence, then there is a limit to what kinds of experiences and relationships her character will find appealing. Her indefinite life, combined with the definite amount of possibilities her character relates to, according to Williams, leads to her boredom and detachment with life:

A boredom connected with the fact that everything that could happen and make sense to one particular human being of 42 had already happened to her. Or, rather, all the sorts of things that could make sense to one woman of a certain character; for EM has a certain character, and indeed, except for her accumulating memories of earlier times, and no doubt some changes of style to suit the passing centuries, seems always to have been much of the same person.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Williams (1973) 91.

<sup>105</sup> Williams (1973) 90.



If one's character remains fixed throughout eternity, then, according to Williams, one will become bored and detached from life because all of the possibilities that one person, with a particular character, can have will ultimately become fulfilled. He therefore determines that life is *not* infinitely pleasurable, even though pleasure *does* accumulate over time, because if one were to live forever, eventually all the pleasures relevant to one person's *particular* character will be satisfied.

If one were to undergo a change of character to escape this boredom and find pleasure in new experiences, then it becomes uncertain that the desires and concerns of this new character would have been desirable to one's previous character; thus, it is unclear if the second condition can be met. Furthermore, it also becomes questionable whether a *particular* individual could survive a change in character. If there is no way to judge whether or not the concerns of a new character would have been attractive to the previous character, then it becomes indiscernible if it is the *same* person surviving this change in character, thereby calling into question the identity condition as well. Given this dilemma, Williams concludes that an immortal life will either succumb to meaninglessness and boredom due to the repeated patterns of experiences a person with a fixed character undergoes, or meaninglessness will be the result of a character that changes throughout eternity, yet cannot derive meaning through her experiences, as she cannot relate the experiences of her new character to those of her previous one.

Before addressing how one's character could change in an immortal existence, it is worthwhile at this point to press Williams on the issue related to why one would necessarily fulfill *all* categorical desires in an immortal life that are relevant to one particular character. It seems, to put it in Williams' words, that at the impoverished end of things, there is at least one categorical desire that cannot be fulfilled: the categorical desire to remain alive. There is some hesitation as to whether the desire to remain alive can be *categorical* in the first place. Is it coherent to say: I

desire to remain alive, therefore I plan for a future in which this desire can be fulfilled? That seems to fit under the form of categorical desires we established in Chapter Three, since this desire to remain alive is not grounded on the assumption that I will go on living.<sup>106</sup> Nonetheless, Williams argues that this will not be enough to sustain an extended existence because the desire must be ‘filled out by some desire for something else.’<sup>107</sup> The problem, it seems, with the mere categorical desire to remain alive concerns its empty object of hope, and without a clear future object of hope, one cannot be propelled forward by that desire, as there is no object of desire to plan a future around.<sup>108</sup>

The claim that an immortal life will inevitably succumb to boredom and meaninglessness for one person living indefinitely with a fixed character (and therefore a fixed amount of desires relative to that character), appears to be justified at this point in our discussion on immortality.<sup>109</sup> To understand Williams’ dilemma with immortality then, we should turn our attention to changes in character and consider why he believes that such a change would necessarily fail to meet the attractiveness condition.

### 4.3 Successive Selves

The difficulty posed by EM’s immortal life concerned the indefinite extension of *one* life. But we could conceive of an immortal life through the extension of an indefinite *series* of lives. If we hold a Parfitian successive selves theory of personal identity<sup>110</sup>—where bodily continuity and psychological connectedness is sufficient for maintaining personhood

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<sup>106</sup> For the form of categorical desires and which desires tend to fall under that category (as distinguished from conditional desires), refer to 3.2.

<sup>107</sup> Williams (1973) 86-87.

<sup>108</sup> In sections 4.5 and 4.6, I consider how repeated pleasurable experiences or endlessly satisfying categorical desires could sustain an immortal existence the concerns one person who lives alone in the condition of being immortal with a fixed character.

<sup>109</sup> Williams’ argument that boredom is a necessary feature of immortality is considered in the latter sections of this chapter.

<sup>110</sup> See Parfit (1984).

throughout time, and therefore satisfies the identity condition—could an immortal life remain meaningful and sustaining through an infinite series of successive selves? According to a successive selves theory of personal identity, a person survives through out her life as *one* person as long as she maintains bodily continuity, but she does so through changes in ‘selfhood’. This theory is motivated by the assumption that the contents of a person’s character admit degrees of change.<sup>111</sup> When a person’s desires and concerns change in degree, that person undergoes a metaphorical change in selfhood so that the previous contents of character refers to a ‘past self’, while the new character refers to the ‘present self’.

It is quite simple to see how such a theory of personal identity could cope with the difficulties EM faced in her immortal life. For one who wishes to defend immortality, the successive selves theory presents an attractive picture as one could undergo changes in selfhood to stave off the persistent boredom that occurs in an unending life. Williams, however, finds this theory of personal identity troubling for the same reasons he rejects the possibility of changes in character to withstand boredom and meaninglessness. The trouble being, it becomes unclear whether the concerns of the future self would have been attractive to the concerns of the past self who originally desired to be immortal.

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<sup>111</sup> Though Williams does not endorse a successive selves theory of personhood, he agrees with the assumption that a person’s character admits degrees of change. When the contents of a person’s character changes, rather than undergoing a change in ‘selves’, a person undergoes a change in character. Williams holds that it is not uncommon for a person’s character to change throughout a mortal life span through a natural progression of aging. During one’s youth, the contents of a person’s character could relate to concerns of the naiveté of the young, and undergo a natural change of the mature concerns of an adult. It is somewhat problematic that Williams admits these degrees of change in character in a mortal lifespan, yet does not hold that one’s character could undergo a change in an immortal life. We could suppose that the immortal person’s character could change through a natural progression of the passing centuries much in the same way that a mortal character may change through the natural progression of aging. Nonetheless, this criticism of Williams does not affect my position on immortality, as I ultimately agree with him that an immortal life could not be a recognizable human life, and therefore, even appropriate changes in character could not present immortality as a desirable alternative to death. For Williams’ discussion on changes of character and his claim that the contents of one’s character admit degrees of change, see Williams (1981) 5-14.

Williams' main concern is once again related to the attractiveness condition. The relevant point to consider, according to him, is if one undergoes a change in selfhood (or character), that change must be attractive to the previous self in order to warrant the anti-Epicurean desire for continued existence over death. If one's character were to change throughout one's immortal life, that future character—and the life led by that character—must be in some way attractive to one's present character who desires for immortality *over the alternative to death*. As Williams explains, 'if he can regard this future life as an object of hope, then equally it must be possible for him to regard it with alarm, or depression, and...opt out of it.'<sup>112</sup> To desire for immortality then, one must find one's future existence to be desirable over death. It is equally possible to foresee a future existence that is a life worth living as it is to foresee a future existence that is *not* a life worth living. One must therefore be able to perceive these changes in character at the time at which one desires to be immortal, and find these future characters attractive in order to warrant the desire for an extended life over the alternative to death.

However, it is indeterminable whether the desires of the future self are attractive to the present self who does not want to die, as these future concerns do not exist at the time one desires for immortality, and the past concerns—of the past self who wished for immortality—no longer exist once a new self emerges. As Williams puts it,

For if we—or he—merely wipe out his present character and desires, there is nothing by which he can judge it at all, at least as something for *him*; while if we leave them in, we—and he—apply something irrelevant to that future life, since (to adapt the Epicurean phrase), when they are there, it is not, and when it is there, they are not.<sup>113</sup>

In other words, there is no way to judge whether the concerns of a future self will be attractive to one's present self, nor can one's present self judge

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<sup>112</sup> Williams (1973) 93.

<sup>113</sup> Williams (1973).

if her present concerns are related to her past concerns as there is no time in which the concerns of the past self and the present self co-exist. In this case, not only does this present an issue regarding the satisfaction of the attractiveness condition, there is also an issue regarding the incapability to conceive of our future desires as *our own*. If the character who desires immortality cannot make sense of the desires of her future character as *hers*, then she cannot make sense of her future life as *her own*. It is therefore questionable if the life led by her future character is *her life*, or a new future life led by some other self in her body.

Change in character, or selves, cannot—on Williams’ account—solve his dilemma pertaining to how an immortal life could be an attractive life. If one’s character remains fixed throughout immortality, one will eventually fulfill all categorical desires relevant to one’s character. If one undergoes a change of character to withstand the boredom that results from the satisfaction of all relevant desires, then one desires to opt out of one’s present perspective in life. It is then unclear as to what extent this person is warranted in being immortal, since the change in character resulted in a life becoming undesirable upon having too much time with that specific perspective on life. More importantly, with this change in perspective, it becomes unclear as to whether it is the same life existing throughout eternity. In other words, it is unclear if it is one person living immortally, or one body existing throughout eternity with a series of individual, distinct lives. And if it is the latter, then we have failed to arrive at a conception of immortality in the first place. Thus, Williams concludes that undergoing changes of selves or character cannot be a viable option to fulfilling the anti-Epicurean hope for a prolonged life.

#### **4.4 Against Immortality**

Provided that the second horn of Williams’ dilemma (that an immortal life remains attractive to one’s immortal character) cannot be rendered

plausible with changes in character or selves, Williams concludes that an immortal life *cannot* be an attractive alternative to death. The only conceivable immortal existence that would serve as a counter-example to the Epicurean position consists of one person living eternally with a fixed character. Meaninglessness then, for Williams, is an essential feature of immortality, because in all conceptions of immortality where a person remains a particular individual—with a particular character—throughout eternity, that person will necessarily fulfill all relevant categorical desires. Without categorical desires, there is nothing propelling one forward into life providing one with a future object of desire, and consequently, there is nothing providing one's life with meaning.

Williams also concludes that with the fulfillment of all categorical desires, immortality not only results in a meaningless life, but it also results in a life filled with unrelenting boredom. It is this last feature, the putative inevitability of unremitting boredom that, for Williams, makes an immortal life an intolerable life. He explains that this boredom 'would be not just a tiresome effect, but a reaction almost perceptual in character to the poverty of one's relation to the environment. Nothing less will do for eternity than something that makes boredom *unthinkable*.'<sup>114</sup> Williams, therefore, provides an additional claim against the desirability of immortality with the claim that an immortal life necessarily succumbs to perpetual boredom. This boredom that an immortal life results in is not just an instance of boredom that may occur in a finite life, but it is rather a boredom that is inescapable due to the combination of an infinite life with a finite amount of possibilities. So boredom, and meaninglessness, are both essential features of immortality on Williams' account.

We can therefore determine from his arguments against death and immortality, that Williams believes there is an *appropriate time to die*—just before categorical desires run out—but it would be a greater misfortune to die too late (after all categorical desires have been fulfilled),

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<sup>114</sup> Williams (1973) 85.

or never at all. Lucretius' Banquet Argument also holds that there is an appropriate time to die: the termination nature provides to life.<sup>115</sup> (BA) claims that to die before or after nature's appropriate termination to life would spoil the values of life. So Williams and Lucretius both hold that there is an appropriate time to die, and to die before or after this appropriate time would be a misfortune. But Williams' argument holds that the appropriate termination to life may be well beyond the limits of the mortal lifespan, and consequently, well beyond Lucretius' proposed time of termination.

For the purposes of (PA), we must determine whether Williams and Lucretius are right: can our rational grounds for regarding the prospect of death as an evil be indefinitely extended in time? Or is there an appropriate time to die as Lucretius and Williams suggest, so that a person could no longer rationally regard death to be an evil once life reaches a certain point? And if there is indeed an appropriate time to die, is this time the one provided by nature or the one provided by the finite amount of possible categorical desires? Or perhaps, there could be an appropriate time to die that is not dependent on life's finitude or an individual's desires.

To answer these questions and consider if (PA) can hold indefinitely, we must first determine if Williams is right, and attempt to provide a conception of immortality that could escape the challenge that meaninglessness and boredom are essential features of immortality. We must then consider the claims provided by Lucretius' (BA) and determine if there is a relationship between the finitude of life and the value of life. Since Williams holds that meaninglessness and boredom are essential features of all cases of immortality, I begin by considering a Williamsian conception of immortality where one person survives alone in her predicament. I then consider a conception of immortality where all living

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<sup>115</sup> See sections 1.5 and Chapter Three for an explanation of Lucretius' (BA). Also see Lucretius (1995) 935-957.

beings share the condition of being immortal. All things being equal, it would be preferable to live a finite life that is meaningful, sustaining, and recognizably human, than an infinite life that is meaningless, boring, and devoid of the human features we have come to recognize as valuable. I suggest that in order for an immortal life to present a desirable alternative to the prospective evil of death (PA) presents us with, we must be able to conceive of an indefinite life that is meaningful, sustaining, valuable, and recognizably human.

#### 4.5 Repeatable Pleasures

To object to Williams' claim that boredom is a necessary feature of immortality, we must conceive of an immortal existence that satisfies the identity condition and the attractiveness condition, as well as prove that boredom is not a necessary consequence. A supporter of the Deprivation account, John Martin Fischer, attempts to do just that, and argues that immortality need not be as bad as Williams claims.<sup>116</sup>

Fischer draws a distinction between different types of pleasures: *self-exhausting pleasures* and *repeatable pleasures*.<sup>117</sup> The misconception that an immortal life necessarily succumbs to boredom and alienation is grounded in the assumption that all pleasures are self-exhausting. According to Fischer, some pleasurable experiences are in themselves *self-exhausting*—they need only be experienced once, or a few times, to be 'complete' in themselves. Upon experiencing a pleasure of the self-exhausting kind, one no longer desires the experience in future affairs. Although the distinction between self-exhausting and repeatable pleasures must be relativized to individuals (as some may find a pleasure to be self-exhausting while others may desire to repeat the same pleasure), Fischer explains that self-exhausting pleasures in general, tend to be ones that are cultivated around the desire to prove something to oneself or others. An

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<sup>116</sup> See Fischer (2004, 2006).

<sup>117</sup> Fischer (2004) 355-356.



example of a self-exhausting pleasure could be the desire to run a marathon just to prove to oneself that one is capable of doing so. Though pleasure is enjoyed in the activity, once the desire is fulfilled, it is no longer an object of hope for future affairs.

But there are other pleasures that once experienced, leave the agent wanting more. That is not to say that the pleasure was not complete or fulfilling, just that the desire is not removed in a single experience. Pleasures of this kind are *repeatable pleasures*, and these are the pleasures that, according to Fischer, should be considered when contemplating the attractiveness of immortality. The pleasures that tend to fall under the category of repeatable pleasures are sensual ones: ‘the pleasures of sex, of eating fine meals and drinking fine wines, of listening to beautiful music, of seeing great art, and so forth.’<sup>118</sup> According to Fischer, Williams’ claim that all positive categorical desires eventually become fulfilled in an immortal life would be correct if all pleasures were self-exhausting. Nonetheless, as Fischer points out, there are pleasures that can be repeatedly enjoyed which could be the object of hope for one’s categorical desires in an immortal existence. Therefore, even if all relevant positive categorical desires have been fulfilled in an immortal life, the desire for a repeated pleasure has the capacity to generate categorical desires, even if the repeatable pleasure was a previous object of hope for a past categorical desire that was already satisfied. So we can understand Fischer’s notion of repeatable pleasures, as presenting us with the concept of ‘repeatable categorical desires’ that could sustain an immortal existence against Williams’ criticisms.

Two issues arise out of Fischer’s notion of repeatable pleasures: The first concerns whether a pleasure can be *infinitely* repeatable—able to propel us forward even through an immortal life? And secondly, would an immortal life consisting solely of repeatable pleasures be a desirable existence? To decisively answer these questions, I first consider how

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<sup>118</sup> Fischer (2004) 356.

Williams and Lucretius might respond to the notion of repeatable pleasures (or repeatable categorical desires) presenting an attractive immortal life, after which I present Fischer's defense. The discussion generates the conclusion that for some, an immortal life that consists only of repeatable pleasures cannot resist (perpetual) boredom, but at the very least, these pleasures determine that boredom is not a *necessary* consequence of immortality, and for those who argue that death is an evil, an unending life filled with repeatable pleasures could present an attractive alternative to death.

Against Fischer's objection, Williams does consider the appeal of repeated pleasures and experiences in an immortal life. He claims that such repeatable pleasures would lose their propulsive character if repeated indefinitely. Williams considers EM's predicament and the possibility of sustaining her life through the repeated experiences of basic human relations that finite beings tend to hold as valuable and pleasurable. He states,

Then it is itself strange that she allows them to be repeated, accepting the same repetitions, the same limitations—indeed, *accepting* is what it later becomes, when earlier it would not, or even could not, have been that. The repeated patterns of personal relations, for instance, must take on a character of being inescapable...The experiences must surely happen to her without really affecting her; she must be, as EM is, detached and withdrawn.<sup>119</sup>

In the above passage, Williams explains that the experiences of personal relations that are generally found pleasurable in a finite life would no longer be enjoyed in an infinite life, simply because they have been experienced *too much*. So for Williams, repeatable pleasures cannot withstand boredom and detachment throughout an unending life, as the repetitions cause the experiences to lose their pleasing character, and without being pleasurable, they also lose their propulsive character.

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<sup>119</sup> Williams (1973) 90.

But what concerns Williams is not just this loss in pleasure; it is the detachment from these human relations that results from the numerous repetitions of the same types of human relations and experiences. Williams would maintain, against Fischer's suggestion of repeatable pleasures, that they could not withstand the tiresome fate which EM's indefinite life resulted in. More importantly, Williams argues that if all that is left in one's life are repeated experiences, then one would become detached from the features of a recognizable human life. I share this intuition. But before considering whether one could live an indefinite recognizable human existence, we must first determine if Fischer's repeatable pleasures could present a conception of immortality that could, at the very least, escape Williams' criticism that boredom is a necessary consequence of immortality.

Lucretius, on the other hand, may be willing to admit to Fischer that a pleasure could be infinitely repeatable throughout immortality. However, as explained in Chapter Three, the Epicureans believed that once the highest pleasure is attained through a state of *ataraxia*, nothing, not even repetition or prolongation of a pleasure, can add to the value of a person's life.<sup>120</sup> Once *ataraxia* is obtained, there are no other pleasures that a person could enjoy because one has full possession of the goods of life in this state. So one could sustain an immortal existence through repetition of pleasures if one has not reached a state of tranquility, but this would be inadvisable for the Epicureans because a life that reaches a state of tranquility is the most valuable life, and is more valuable than an infinite life that never reaches this state. If one practises rational calculation of maximizing pleasures over pain, there is no reason why one should not reach *ataraxia* within the mortal lifespan, and therefore, for Lucretius and Epicurus, an immortal life full of repeatable pleasures would not be a preferable life to a mortal one that achieves *ataraxia*.

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<sup>120</sup> For a discussion of the Epicurean beliefs concerning pleasure, refer to Chapter Three.

Against the Epicureans and Williams, Fischer maintains that repeatable pleasures would remain propulsive throughout immortality. With regards to Williams' objection that repetitions of certain activities or pleasures would lose their character of being pleasurable, Fischer argues that this can be avoided if one disperses the repeatable pleasures throughout one's indefinite life. He admits that if one repeatable pleasure were experienced every day, the tiresome effect Williams' describes would occur: 'even the most delectable lobster thermidor would quickly become revolting if consumed at every meal.'<sup>121</sup> Nonetheless, Fischer points out that there are several repeatable pleasures that a person may enjoy, and if these pleasures are distributed in an appropriate pattern, one need not become tired of life or succumb to the boredom Williams believes must necessarily occur. Williams may further press that if one repeatable pleasure would result in this tiresome fate, then a nexus of repeatable pleasures dispersed evenly throughout one's unending life would only postpone this. However, while some may agree with Williams and hold that they would become bored with an unending life filled only by evenly placed repeatable pleasures, the opponent of Williams can point out, as Fischer does, that there is no *inevitability* involved.<sup>122</sup>

Fischer's theory of evenly dispersed repeatable pleasures provides a conception of immortality where boredom is not a *necessary* consequence. Against the Epicurean worry that an immortal life consisting of repeatable pleasures would be less valuable than a finite life that reaches *ataraxia*, Fischer could respond that they nonetheless provide a way in which an immortal life could withstand boredom and prove to be a pleasant existence. Thus for Fischer, a proponent of the view that death is necessarily an evil could reasonably hold that an immortal life sustained

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<sup>121</sup> Fischer (2004) 356.

<sup>122</sup> The question of whether or not repeatable pleasures—appropriately distributed—would sustain an immortal life appears to be more of a psychological question, rather than a fact about human desires as such.

by repeatable pleasures would be a preferable life to the alternative finite life that results in the evil of death.

However, for the purposes of (PA), Fischer's notion of repeatable pleasures cannot present a desirable alternative to death because repeatable pleasures cannot prove, against Williams and Lucretius, that an immortal life would be as valuable as a finite life. Therefore, we still need to conceive of an immortal life that could be sustaining, meaningful, recognizably human, and valuable to place a plausible objection to Williams' and Lucretius' arguments of immortality. The next section attempts to escape Williams' criticisms against immortality by identifying a categorical desire that could remain endlessly propulsive throughout an indefinite existence.

#### **4.6 An Unfulfillable Categorical Desire**

According to the identity and attractiveness conditions, the future life of the immortal person must remain attractive to the desires and concerns his character held at the time of which he desired for immortality, and he must remain the same identical person throughout his immortal existence. For this immortal life to escape Williams' criticisms against immortality, it must remain endlessly sustaining and meaningful. If we can identify a categorical desire that is endlessly sustaining, yet never completely fulfilled, then we may be able to conceive of an immortal existence that would meet the anti-Epicurean hope for continued existence, and prove, against Williams, that an immortal life need not necessarily succumb to boredom and meaninglessness. The categorical desire for intellectual pursuit is at least one example of a desire that is never fully satisfied, yet could be endlessly sustaining throughout an unending life.

Williams himself considers such a possibility, and agrees that it would be endlessly absorbing, but claims that an intellectual pursuit would be *too* absorbing as the pursuit would overtake a person's individuality. He explains,

Some philosophers have pictured an eternal existence as occupied in something like intense intellectual enquiry...The activity is engrossing, self-justifying, affords, as it may appear, endless new perspectives, and by being engrossing enables one to lose oneself. It is that last feature that supposedly makes boredom unthinkable, by providing something that is, in that earlier phrase, at every moment totally absorbing. But if one is totally and perpetually absorbed in such an activity, and loses oneself in it, then as those words suggest, we come back to the problem of satisfying the conditions that it should be me who lives for ever, and that the eternal life should be in prospect of some interest.<sup>123</sup>

Although Williams admits that the categorical desire for intellectual knowledge would stave off boredom and provide meaning throughout an immortal existence, it would do so at the cost of taking away a person's individuality, as such a desire would be at every moment completely engrossing. If Williams is correct, then a person who extends his life to undergo an indefinite pursuit for intellectual knowledge would not be able to satisfy the identity condition, as the perpetually engrossing pursuit would take over his identity.

I am not inclined to agree with Williams that such an activity must necessarily entail loss of individuality. The problem, it seems, is that Williams only considers such an activity under Stuart Hampshire's interpretation of Spinoza's conception of intellectual knowledge, where intellectual activity is considered the most free state a person can be in; so free, that the person is free from his own character.<sup>124</sup> If one must give up one's individuality to pursue the categorical desire for intellectual activity, then an issue arises concerning whether the person desires that *he* pursue the intellectual activity, or just desires that the activity *itself* carries on. Given the supposed loss of individuality, it must be the latter—a desire for the activity itself, in which case one need not be immortal in order for the

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<sup>123</sup> Williams (1973) 96.

<sup>124</sup> This is a conclusion from Spinoza that is elaborated by Stuart Hampshire. See S. Hampshire (1972).

desire to be satisfied. And if the only way in which the categorical desire for intellectual pursuit could be carried out is through Spinoza's conception (as interpreted by Hampshire), then with the loss of individuality, the identity condition can not be satisfied.

Yet it remains unclear as to why one must pursue intellectual activity of this sort? Is it not possible that one could have a categorical desire for intellectual activity and not *lose* oneself in that pursuit? The problem concerns the fact that Williams appeals to an activity that is at *every moment* totally absorbing, and it is not clear that such an activity need be at *all* times absorbing. The only requirement is for the categorical desire to be sustainable indefinitely, which does not entail that it must be at every moment (eternally) sustaining. In fact, many of the activities that are typically pursued in a mortal life, though engrossing, are not without instances of boredom. Even if there are moments of boredom in an immortal life, as long as the categorical desire for intellectual pursuit could withstand the *perpetual* boredom EM's life resulted in, this desire, and the eternal life driven by it, could meet Williams' two conditions for immortality and escape his criticism that an immortal life must necessarily be meaningless and boring.

From our previous discussion of Williams in the beginning of this chapter, it was established that the boredom which would result from an immortal life is not the ordinary boredom that occurs in a finite life. For Williams, a mortal life would not become meaningless if it experienced an instance or period of boredom. The reason why an immortal life necessarily becomes meaningless results from the unrelenting boredom an immortal person's life succumbs to upon fulfilling all categorical desires relevant to that person's character. So we can distinguish between mortal boredom and immortal boredom, by identifying an instance of boredom as

boredom *simpliciter*, and an unending period of boredom as *perpetual* boredom.<sup>125</sup>

If in a mortal life an activity or the pursuit of a categorical desire can prove to be engrossing, yet not without instances of boredom *simpliciter*, there is no reason to assume that an intellectual pursuit throughout eternity could not also undergo instances of boredom *simpliciter*, yet remain a sustaining existence. In order for the categorical desire for intellectual pursuit to present an attractive picture of immortality that withstands *perpetual* boredom, it need not be completely engrossing at all times, and can in fact, undergo instances of boredom *simpliciter*. All that is needed for the categorical desire to escape Williams' criticisms is for it to be infinitely satisfying and unending. Given this, and provided that categorical desires need only to engage us intermittently, it is possible to conceive of a person having the categorical desire for intellectual pursuit without 'losing' himself in that pursuit.

We have therefore identified a categorical desire that defeats Williams' argument that boredom is a necessary consequence of immortality, as well as his claim that an immortal life would necessarily be a meaningless life. This resulted in our discussion of the categorical desire for intellectual activity that can never be completely fulfilled, yet can remain satisfying and engrossing, without being totally absorbing at every moment. A categorical desire construed in this way would meet the identity condition, and as long as it coincides with a person's mortal character, it would remain attractive to the future person, thereby also meeting the requirements of the attractiveness condition. Of course not everyone's character would relate to the categorical desire for intellectual pursuit, but for the people that it does concern, there is at least a conceivable picture of immortality that is without perpetual boredom and

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<sup>125</sup> Jeremy Wisnewski makes a similar point by distinguishing boredom *simpliciter* from *fatal* boredom, where the latter boredom—fatal boredom—concerns the boredom that results when all categorical desires have been fulfilled and one no longer has any reason to continue living. See Wisnewski (2005) 27-36.



is at the same time meaningful.<sup>126</sup> Furthermore, unfulfillable yet satisfying categorical desires are not limited to intellectual pursuits. We can imagine cultivating other desires, such as the desire to alleviate suffering, which could appeal to different characters and promise out this hope for an immortal life to others.

There is, however, an issue of personal identity that must be addressed at this point, which is separate from the issue of whether or not it is the *same* person living immortally with the categorical desire for intellectual pursuit. This second issue of personal identity concerns whether a human life could be extended with the categorical desire for intellectual pursuit and still resemble a recognizably *human* existence. That is, even if it were clear that it is the same person living immortally who is able to forgo *perpetual* boredom by undertaking an intellectual pursuit, could this extended life resemble a *human* life? Could the structure of human relationships and values remain the same to a person who is immortal?

As EM's case showed us, EM was able to fulfill her categorical desire to become one of the world's greatest singers, but her extended existence removed her from personal relations and emotions that are definitive characteristics of a human life. At the end of her extended life, EM could no longer feel real love because she had witnessed the death of so many of her loved ones. Though the categorical desire to become one of the world's greatest opera singers did not sustain EM throughout her entire immortal existence, it did withstand boredom for a long period of time. Even when EM was sustained by her categorical desire, she still became detached from human love. Although we have identified a categorical desire that is indefinitely sustaining, yet can never be completely fulfilled, this desire may not be sufficient in deterring the

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<sup>126</sup> An unfulfillable, yet satisfying categorical desire provides an attractive picture of immortality to those who, like Fischer and the deprivation theorist, believe death to be an evil. Furthermore, it also provides a desirable alternative to death for those who agree with Williams that certain desires provide good reason to regard one's death *before* the fulfillment of such desires as a misfortune.

detachment to human life that EM's life succumbed to. Accordingly, it may be the case that all of our desires cannot be satisfied within the limits of a finite life, but the values of a human life may be, as Lucretius' (BA) suggests, inseparable from the finite temporal structure of life. This then raises a pressing issue of whether our human values can be extended indefinitely. In the following section, when we consider an immortal existence where all persons share the condition of being immortal, it is suggested that many of our human values would be absent from such an existence.

Williams argues that this detachment from human relations EM's extended life resulted in is an inevitable result of immortality. He therefore claims that we could not live an eternal life that is a recognizable human life.<sup>127</sup> I share this intuition. I am not inclined, however, to agree with Williams and hold that it is an essential feature of immortality that an immortal life could not be a recognizable human life. But the intuitive inevitability to become detached from personal relations (either from repetitions or because they are no longer necessary for survival if one is invulnerable to death) is certainly a pressing issue of concern to take into consideration when decisively resolving if immortality can present a preferable alternative over the evil of death (PA) accounts for. The consideration of a conception of immortality in which all persons share the condition of being immortal may help us decisively determine if finitude is a necessary condition to leading a recognizable human existence. We should therefore turn our discussion concerning the desirability of immortality to this alternative conception of an immortal existence.

#### **4.7 Immortality and Value**

The discussion of immortality thus far has been concerned with a conception of immortality as presented by Williams, where one person lives alone in her immortal condition. Williams insists that perpetual

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<sup>127</sup> Williams (1973) 89.

boredom and meaninglessness are features not limited to one person being alone in her predicament, but are *essential* features of immortality. Furthermore, he claims that there is no conception of immortality that could be attractive and recognizably human.<sup>128</sup> Although we have already defeated (with the categorical desire for intellectual pursuit) Williams' claim that boredom and meaningless are necessary features of immortality, it is useful to consider another picture of immortality where everyone shares the condition of being immortal to determine whether such an eternal life could be an attractive human existence over the evil of death (PA) presents us with.<sup>129</sup>

Some believe that immortality is given its strongest case under the conception of an immortal existence where all living persons share the condition of being immortal, as opposed to one person existing alone in that predicament. Nonetheless, the immortal life of EM's case is conceptually easier to imagine because her infinite life exists amongst the finite human life that we are well acquainted with. As soon as we bring in a picture of immortality where everyone shares the condition of being immortal, it becomes difficult to imagine what such a life would be like. Many of the structures of human life revolve around temporal limitations, and if this limitation were removed, it may be the case that many of our values and experiences as human beings would also be removed.

In considering a conception of immortality where everyone shares the condition of being immortal the strength of Lucretius' (BA) is put under investigation. This conception of immortality removes a direction of the temporal structure to life, which according to Lucretius, is a necessary limitation to life, as it plays an instrumental role in how we come to appreciate the values of life. Accordingly, a large focus of our

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<sup>128</sup> Williams (1973) 89.

<sup>129</sup> Immortal is meant in one direction, supposing that people are born and then imagined as permanent adults who are invulnerable to death. In this section, when I speak of immortality or time as infinite, it is meant as eternal in one direction—there is a beginning, but no end.

attention in this section concerns the purported relationship between mortality and human value, and how that relationship may factor into the attractiveness of immortality. Although the experiences and relationships we value in life often drive the desire for immortality so that we can have more time with these values, this section suggest that such an existence could not allow humans to enjoy these values eternally, as many of our human values would be absent in an infinite life.

Suppose that everyone shares EM's condition of being immortal in one direction. Like EM, the only condition we are removing is death. So we are not imagining a Utopian sense of immortality, but rather we are considering what human life would be like if it were extended indefinitely after birth. Let us first consider what such an existence would give us. We could have unlimited time to pursue what ever we desire, to enjoy the company of our loved ones, we could start one profession and pick up a new one without being concerned about wasting time. Essentially, we are given the gift of time to enjoy—unlimitedly—what we value in life. But a relevant question emerges: would our values remain the same if time were infinite?

To answer this question, we must consider how our relationships and activities would change according to the removal of our finitude. Many of our human relationships and activities are dependent on the finite temporal structure of life. Through the awareness of the finitude of life, there is a sense of urgency in the types of activities we pursue, and we must rationally calculate which professions or projects to pursue, because (as (PA) demonstrates), it is often the case that we cannot accomplish all of our desires and pursuits within the temporal boundaries of a finite life. Although an immortal life provides us with an unlimited time to accomplish our desires and pursuits, part of the value that is derived from our accomplishments concerns the fact that they were achieved within the limitations of a finite timeframe. Additionally, our own accomplishments would not be as unique to us as all persons could decide to undergo the

same pursuit throughout their indefinite lives. Although there may be value to these accomplishments in an immortal life, we must anticipate that the value enjoyed would be significantly reduced or significantly different from our human value of accomplishment.

We must also address what would make an immortal life worth living. Once we remove death, we also remove the end of great suffering that death can bring. I could not imagine anything worse than living an eternal life in an intolerable condition. We could, of course, remove this risk, and suppose that we can feel pain in an immortal existence, but never to the amount that would make our lives not worth living. But if we minimize the degree to which we can feel pain or become injured, we do so at the cost of minimizing our value of good health. Related to this point, Nussbaum claims that once we begin to remove certain conditions or characteristics of a mortal life to make an immortal life more attractive, we also remove the human values that make life attractive to us in the first place. Nussbaum explains,

The closer we come to reimporting mortality—for example, allowing the possibility of permanent unbearable pain, or crippling handicaps—the closer we come to a human sense of the virtues and their importance. But that is the point: the further mortality is removed, the further they are.<sup>130</sup>

According to Nussbaum, the values we find desirable in life have a specific connection to the fact that we are mortal beings. Our finitude brings with it a limitation and risk that shapes our relationships and activities in such a way that we come to value them. Once we remove our finitude, we also remove the values that make life attractive to us. For example, Nussbaum claims that friendship, love, and love of one's country 'consists in a willingness to give up one's life for another' and moderation 'is a management of appetite in a being for whom excess of sorts can bring

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<sup>130</sup> Nussbaum (1994) 228.

illness and death...<sup>131</sup> If immortality is desirable because it gives us unlimited time with the relationships we value, according to Nussbaum, the relationships that we value would be absent in an immortal life.

In general, Nussbaum's argument holds that the fact of death carries with it a limitation, making it a *necessary* condition to provide content to *human* values. That is not to say that an immortal life would be without values of its own, unlike Williams, Nussbaum believes that an immortal life could be a valuable and sustaining life, but the values in an immortal life would be significantly different from our human values. I share this intuition. I am inclined to agree with Nussbaum that many of the values we take as attractive in life would be absent from an immortal existence as our values are derived in part from the fact that life is finite. This would explain why EM became detached from human love, as she had to grieve the loss of some many children and husbands. But if we were immortal, it is difficult to conceive of the value of love. Would we love another person eternally, or would we have periods of loving relations with an indefinite amount of people? It may be the case that love is valuable in an immortal life, but as is evident, it is difficult to conceive of how our value of love (and other human values) that exists in finite life could fit into an indefinite life. Given (PA), we have good reason to regard death as an evil to be avoided as it would prevent the satisfaction of categorical desires, but if life were extended indefinitely so that death could not prevent the satisfaction of our desires, the objects of our desires may not be objects of value in an immortal life. According to Nussbaum's account, which I am sympathetic to, immortality cannot be a desirable alternative to the evil of death (PA) presents us with, because an immortal life would not hold the satisfaction of our ordinary objects of desires as valuable. Thus we could not have any justifying reasons for living an immortal life over a finite life, as our human values would be absent from that life.

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<sup>131</sup> Nussbaum (1994) 227.

Against Nussbaum, Fischer claims that there are conditions, other than death, that provide a point to human values, so that an immortal existence need not be absent of all human values, and accordingly, we can conceive of an attractive account of a recognizably *human* immortal life.<sup>132</sup> Given our vulnerability as mortal beings, we come to value good health, safety, happiness, and so forth. Fischer argues that death is not the only condition that provides a risk or limitation that gives a point to these values. For example, to value good health, we need only the risk of illness. As long as there are extremes, we do not need death to value pleasant conditions and disvalue unpleasant ones. In relation to my previous concern that unbearable pain or undesirable states of living must be removed in order to make immortality an attractive life worth living, Fischer suggests that people could undergo long periods of depression, boredom, and physical pain followed by regeneration and recovery. Consequently, life would maintain the ‘banquet’ structure of a beginning, middle, and end—that Lucretius claims shapes the value of life—and once life reaches an appropriate ‘end’, the banquet will regenerate itself so that we can envisage it as an ‘all-you-can-eat-buffet’.<sup>133</sup>

So Fischer argues that one extreme gives value to another so that we need not have death as a condition implicit to maintaining human values. But his conception of an immortal life structured around indefinite regenerations of distinct ‘banquet-lives’ appears dangerously close to an immortal existence of successive selves. The life that one envisages from this depiction of immortality is an infinite series of lives, navigated by ‘one’ person or body. So we are once again concerned with continuity of personal identity throughout an immortal life. On Fischer’s account, it is indiscernible whether it is one person living immortally throughout these regenerations, or several ‘persons’ in one body. At which case, if it is the latter—which I am inclined to claim—Fischer has failed to arrive at a

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<sup>132</sup> Fischer (2006).

<sup>133</sup> Fischer (2006) 379.

theory of immortality in the first place. Furthermore, Fischer's conception of immortality cannot meet the identity condition as it becomes unclear whether the desires of a future regenerated life are attractive to one's desires in one's present life.

An additional issue arises with Fischer's theory concerning what he calls the 'Super-Powers Problem'.<sup>134</sup> If everyone were immortal, there would be a general awareness of this condition: all individuals would recognize that they are invulnerable to death. Given this realization, individuals know that they can pursue any activity without risking their own lives. Though this may seem initially attractive, one must worry that such a life, and the experiences in that life, would be fundamentally different from a human life, so different, that the attractiveness would be incomprehensible to us. For example, the risk involved in skydiving is significantly reduced once understood that such an activity could not terminate one's own life. Nonetheless, Fischer maintains that since there are dangers—other than death—an immortal life would be different, yet would remain analogous to human life. The activities humans enjoy (skydiving for example) would not be taken for granted provided these other dangers. However, one of the reasons skydiving is so attractive, and pleasurable if performed correctly, is the very reason that one's life is in jeopardy. We must therefore anticipate a certain reduction of pleasure in the activity once the risk of death is removed.

More importantly—as Nussbaum's argument demonstrates—the awareness of our invulnerability to death, that is, the awareness of our infinitude, would change the meanings and values of our desires in ways that are incomprehensible to us.<sup>135</sup> As previously explained, the value that humans enjoy from accomplishment or satisfaction of desires would be significantly reduced, as part of the value of an accomplishment is derived from the awareness of our finitude. It is difficult to determine which, if

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<sup>134</sup> Fischer (2006) 380.

<sup>135</sup> Nussbaum (1994) 229.



any, of our human values would remain in an immortal life. Even if there are dangers other than death, as Fischer claims, I am still inclined to agree with Nussbaum that many of our human values would still be absent from an immortal life. Furthermore, though certain dangers other than death may provide pleasurable experiences and values similar to human ones, there does not appear to be a danger, *other than death*, that can provide limitation to which life *itself* would be recognized as valuable.<sup>136</sup> So even if we cannot identify all of our human values that would be absent from an immortal life, we can determine that, without death, there is not an extreme or a threat to life that can provide the recognition that life as such is valuable. Therefore, against Fischer, I suggest that his conception of immortality cannot be attractive to us because it cannot account for one of the greatest human values that we appreciate: the value of life as such.

When Williams writes, '[i]mmortality, or a state without death, would be meaningless, I shall suggest; so, in a sense, death gives the meaning to life',<sup>137</sup> he claims, like Nussbaum, that death is a *necessary* condition to which our various pursuits and activities in life have meaning and value. Against Williams however, the discussion in this chapter has demonstrated there can be meaning and value to certain activities without death. But Williams was right—death *does* give the meaning to life—the condition of life's being finite is the *only* condition by which we can find life *itself* as valuable and meaningful. As Nagel pointed out, death is the condition that deprives us of life, thereby making us recognize that life as such, is something to be valued. Nagel and the other deprivation theorist, argue that death is bad, not because of any positive features of death, but because of the good that it deprives: life. But we must ask the deprivation theorist if life would still be recognized as good if there were nothing to

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<sup>136</sup> We could, perhaps, compare the value of each series of 'banquet' lives and place values on life through a comparison of which trip through the 'all-you-can-eat-buffet' was most valuable. I am nonetheless, still inclined to claim that life as such, would not be recognized as valuable without an awareness that life could be taken away.

<sup>137</sup> Williams (1983) 82.

take it away? It may be the case that life would still be intrinsically good and valuable without death, but the underlying issue is whether or not we would appreciate the intrinsic value of life without the threat of death. Consider, for example, the value of breathable air. It might take the threat of losing breathable air to make us *realize* that it is valuable, though the threat is not necessary to *make* the air itself valuable. So death provides the value to life, as it takes the threat of losing life, to make us *realize* that life as such is valuable.

Against the claim that the fact of death provides the extreme that limits life, one may suppose that birth provides an extreme to life. However, birth is merely one pole of existence; it is a limit to life in the sense that it *gives* one life or existence. Given that immortality would only be in one direction, we would be equipped to comprehend the difference between existence and non-existence, but we would never know that existence is something that could be taken away, we would only understand it as something *given*. In short, we would only understand things coming *into* existence, but not *out* of existence. Without the fact of death, we could not recognize the value of life because the concept of life being taken away would be incomprehensible to us. Thus, the fact of death is the only condition that can deprive life, thereby making death a *necessary* condition to appreciating the value of life.

I thus conclude that there is an appropriate termination to life itself. In part, Williams and Lucretius were right: part of life's being valuable is derived from the termination of life. As this chapter has demonstrated, our individual lives can still be valuable beyond the boundaries of the natural termination of life, but we have also seen that many of our human values—specifically the value of life as such—are inseparable from the fact that life is finite. Thus, while we may regard the prospect of our deaths as an evil to be avoided so that we may fulfill our categorical desires, an immortal life would not be a desirable alternative to a finite

life, because an immortal life cannot be a recognizably valuable human life.

## 5

### A New Middle Ground

Our examination of the metaphysical nature of death and its moral implications has yielded mixed results over the past four chapters. In Chapter One, the Epicureans claimed that death, and the state of being dead, cannot be of any moral worth for the person who died because experience and existence are necessary conditions for attributing value to a person, and death is the privation of experience and existence. In Chapters Two and Three, we considered two anti-Epicurean arguments which held that there is nothing bad about the state of being dead as such, but the negative features of death—what death denies—is bad for the person who dies. The deprivation theorists held that death, and the state of being dead, are an evil for the person who dies because a person's non-existence deprives that person of the goods of life. Williams conceded to the Epicureans that the state of being dead cannot be bad for the person who died, but death can be an evil for the person who dies, if his death prevents him from satisfying his present categorical desires. Nonetheless, neither Williams nor the deprivation theorists could provide a plausible objection to the Epicureans, as they could not account for how a person, who no longer exists, could be the subject of an evil. It was therefore concluded that once death occurs, neither death nor the state of being dead can be bad for the person who dies.

In Chapter Three, I proposed an argument (PA), which accounts for the intuition that death is an evil when the goods of life are still desirable, by locating the misfortune of death in the prospect of death. According to my position, death—the termination of life—cannot be an evil *simpliciter*, as there is no one for whom death is bad for once it

occurs. However, death can be rationally regarded as an evil in its prospect if it would prevent the satisfaction of present categorical desires. This argument avoids the difficulties the anti-Epicureans faced, as death is not an evil *simpliciter*, it is only an evil in its anticipation. I claimed that categorical desires provide us with good reasons, against the Epicureans, to rationally regard death as an evil to be avoided. We therefore also have good reasons to resent the finitude of life; to believe that a life invulnerable to death would be preferable to a finite life, as it would allow more satisfaction of our desires with the values of life.

Unfortunately, Chapter Four showed us that even if all of our desires cannot be satisfied within the boundaries of a finite lifespan, an immortal life would *not* be a desirable alternative to death. It was determined that while an immortal life would have values of its own, the values would be significantly different from many of our human values that are inseparable from the finite temporal structure of life. We are thus left with a dilemma: A prolonged life can provide us with more experiences with the values in life, giving us good reasons to desire for an extension of life beyond its natural limit, and to regard the prospect of death as an evil to be avoided; but if death—the termination to life—were removed, the necessary condition that presents life as something to be valued would also be removed, along with many of the human values that are inseparable from the finite temporal structure of life.

There are three possible responses. In light of our conclusions, we could defend Epicureanism and claim that it is irrational to regard the prospect of death as anything bad for us if it is not bad in its occurrence. Accordingly, it would also be irrational to resent life's being finite, as once our individual lives are terminated, we cannot be harmed by the finitude of our individual lives. Or we could side with the anti-Epicureans and attempt to identify a condition other than death, that would allow us to

recognize the value of life.<sup>138</sup> If there is such a condition, we could make sense of life being valuable and recognized as such without death, but we still could not cope with the unresolved issues of this position (which specifically concern how a person can be the subject of an evil that occurs at a time when he no longer exists). At best, we could only defend the view that the prospect of death can be an evil, but death *simpliciter*, and the state of being dead, cannot be an evil. This would then be a defense of a middle ground between the Epicureans and anti-Epicureans.

This concluding chapter presents a middle ground that has not yet been considered. As we saw in Chapter Three, Williams proposed a middle path between the Epicureans and the anti-Epicureans with the position that death can be an evil, but to never die would be an even *greater* evil. As previously determined, the claim that a person's death is bad for *him* at the time in which his death occurs is implausible; the grounds for the misfortune are—*a fortiori*—irrelevant once that person no longer exists. For this reason, I have rejected the deprivation account and any account that purports that death *simpliciter* is an evil for the person who dies. The present chapter defends the Lucretian claim that there is an instrumental value to death and negotiates a middle path between the Epicureans and Williams.

In this chapter I maintain that we can have rational grounds to regard the prospect of our death as a misfortune to be avoided. Nonetheless, though death *can* be rationally regarded as an evil, I claim that the fact of death as such—the fact that life is finite—*cannot* rationally

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<sup>138</sup> In defense of the anti-Epicureans and immortality, it could be suggested that if all persons were immortal, life as such could still be presented as valuable through the comparisons of different possible lives. For example, we could imagine a different possible world where all persons are mortal beings, and then compare that world with our lives that are invulnerable to death. Nonetheless in this case, we could perhaps value our immortal lives over those of mortal lives, but I am not convinced that this comparison of other finite lives could provide a limit to our immortal lives, so that life as such is recognized a valuable. There still would not be a condition in the realm of the immortal beings that would provide a great threat to the loss of life, and I am therefore inclined to claim that life as such would not be recognized as valuable, or—in the very least—the value of life as such would be significantly lower for those who are immortal.

be regarded as an evil, as the finitude of life is a necessary condition for the recognition that life as such is valuable. While it appears as though I have reached a dilemma by holding that our own deaths can be regarded as an evil in its prospect, as well as holding that the fact of death as such cannot rationally be regarded as an evil, this chapter determines that we can attach a different value to the finitude of our individual lives than to the overall value that we attach to the finitude of life as such. The proposed middle ground concludes that the finitude of life cannot be an evil, because the fact of death presents a threat to life, so that life as such is recognized as valuable. But since it is often the case that our desires cannot be fulfilled within the natural limits of the finitude of life, we can rationally regard our own future deaths as an evil for us, even though the fact that life is finite cannot be an evil and is, in fact, an instrumental good.

### **5.1 A Williams-Lucretian Position**

To present a position that negotiates a middle path between Lucretius and Williams, we must address what makes life and death valuable. Our discussion has already established that once death occurs, neither death nor the state of being dead can be of moral worth for the person who died. But we have also seen that the fact that life is finite has certain implications on the value of life as a *whole*, and the desires that we have with the goods in life determine collectively how individuals value the prospect of their own *individual* deaths. We can therefore decisively infer that death contributes to the value of life in two ways: the fact of death shapes the value of life as a *whole*, and the time in which we die *can* affect the value of our *individual* lives. Since death contributes to the overall value of life, we can attach an instrumental value to death as such. Since the prospects of our individual deaths contribute to the value of our individual lives, we can attach a value of disutility (or utility) to death. To decisively determine how death should be valued while we are alive, we

must first consider the role in which death plays to the value of our individual lives and life as such.

Williams has shown us that the value of our individual lives can be assessed in terms of desire-satisfaction—there are certain goods in life that are experienced when a desire is satisfied and is pleasurable upon its satisfaction.<sup>139</sup> While our individual lives can be of value to us according to our desires, we have seen that there is a value to life that is independent of desire-satisfaction. In section 4.7, we considered an immortal life that could remain sustaining, meaningful and valuable with a categorical desire that can never be completely fulfilled but is endlessly engrossing. Even though a categorical desire remains, we saw that we can still become detached from certain valuable characteristics of life, such as the ability to feel human love. In the consideration of all persons sharing the condition of being immortal, we saw that much of what we find as valuable in life derives from the fact that there is a termination to life. Therefore the value of life cannot be assessed solely in terms of desire-satisfaction, but it must also be assessed, as Lucretius claimed, according to its finite temporal structure. Since death is the condition that makes life finite, thereby providing one pole of the temporal structure of life, death must play an instrumental role in the value of life.

I have thus arrived at two ways in which the fact of death contributes to the value of life: the subjective value of an individual's life can be assessed in terms of desire-satisfaction, and anything that would prevent the satisfaction of desires—such as a person's death—provides that person with rational grounds to regard it as an evil. The overall value of life can be assessed in terms of its finite temporal structure, where death provides an end to that structure. Accordingly, we can assess the value of our individual deaths in terms of the value of our individual lives, as well as assess the overall value of death in terms of the overall value of life.

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<sup>139</sup> Williams (1973). For an account of Williams' argument that death can be valued in terms of desire-satisfaction, refer to the discussion of his position in Chapter Three.



Subjectively speaking, a person's death can have a negative value for that person if his possible death would prevent the satisfaction of desires. Death may also have a positive value for a person if that person's possible death would bring the end to a life that is no longer desirable. So the value a person can attach to his own death is grounded in a utility or disutility, according to the desires a person possesses. The fact of death as such—the fact that life is finite—is assessed in terms of the value of life, and since the fact of death provides a threat to life, the fact of death as such is instrumentally good as it makes the value of life recognizable.

Now it appears that I have reached a dilemma in assessing the value of death. I defended the Epicurean claim that there is no value to death in its occurrence, a negative (or positive value) in its prospect, and an instrumentally good value in the fact that life is finite. I explained that the Epicureans were *not* inconsistent to hold that there is no value to death, while at the same time holding that life is valuable, because experience is necessary in order to appreciate value, and one cannot experience once dead.<sup>140</sup> It is therefore consistent to attach a value to death in its prospect—yet not in its occurrence—as we can have experience with the valuable things in life that our deaths would prevent, but we cannot experience anything of value once dead, as death is the privation of experience. So the dilemma consists in the negative (or positive) value that can be attached to death in its prospect, and the positive value death brings to the value of life in the fact that we die at all.<sup>141</sup> But how can it both be good and bad for us that we will die?

In part, Lucretius has already provided us with answer to this question. By proposing an argument for the appropriate temporal

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<sup>140</sup> Refer to Chapter Three for this defense of the consistency of the Epicurean position.

<sup>141</sup> Although I claim that death can be rationally regarded as an evil to be avoided, or a good to be welcomed in its prospect, the discussion of this chapter focuses on the negative value that the prospect of death may bring to a person's life. This is not to deny the possibility of the prospect of death valued as something good, but it is rather for a dialectical purpose as the majority of the positions in the death debate are concerned with how death can be bad for the person who dies.

structure to which the value of life is best enjoyed, his (BA) claims that death can be bad if it occurs at an inappropriate time. But it also holds that the values of life are best enjoyed according to the finite temporal structure of life, and if the finite limitation were removed from the temporal structure of life, the values in life would be spoiled. Accordingly, Lucretius argued that we should make the finitude of life a matter for contentment.<sup>142</sup>

In Chapter One, I explained that Lucretius' (BA), as well as the Epicurean arguments against the badness of death, were insufficient to yield the conclusion that the finitude of life cannot be an evil. But in our considerations of an infinite life, we saw that Lucretius was right; many of our human values are inseparable from the finite temporal structure of life. Although we may not be able to satisfy all of our desires for these human values within the natural termination of life, an infinite life cannot be preferable to a finite one because many of our human values would be absent from an infinite life.

To render this dilemma concerning how the fact of death can be both good and bad for us, we could, like Lucretius, hold that death is instrumentally good because it provides the termination to life. We must however reject Lucretius' claim that the values of life are best enjoyed according to its natural temporal structure, as (PA) determined that the value of our individual lives may be best enjoyed outside of the boundaries of the natural termination of life. But we have also argued, in defense of Lucretius, that many of our human values are inseparable from this finite temporal structure, and that death is the necessary condition that places the limitation to life, so that life as such can be recognized as something valuable for us. Accordingly, we *can* regard the fact that we will die as a misfortune for us, if an untimely death would prevent the satisfaction of our desires with the goods of life. However, since the fact

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<sup>142</sup> Lucretius (1995) 935-959. Also see the discussion of Lucretius' (BA) in section 1.4, 3.1, and 3.3.

of death as such is the means by which we recognize that life itself is valuable, death *must* be instrumentally good.

I have therefore argued that we *can* attach a value to the prospect of our individual deaths. It would not be irrational, from a subjective point of view, to regard the prospect of one's own death as something bad for one, if it would prevent one from fulfilling one's desires. However, I also claimed that the fact of death as such—the fact that life will necessarily terminate—must be (objectively speaking) instrumentally good. It is not a contradiction to attach these two values to death because one value—the instrumentally good value—concerns death as such; the fact that life as a whole is finite. While the other value, the disutility (or utility) value, concerns that fact that we will die, that our individual lives are finite. But a relevant issue now arises: if the finitude of life as such cannot be an evil, but the finitude of *my* life presents itself as an evil for me as it would prevent the satisfaction of my categorical desires, should I regard death as bad or good?

To render the claim that the fact of death can be bad in its prospect, but is at the same time instrumentally good, I propose the following position that negotiates a middle path between Lucretius and Williams:

(LW) The prospect of the fact of death *can* be regarded as a misfortune, but need not be, because the fact of death is a *necessary* condition to valuing the very things that we regard as misfortunate if death prevents.

Death *can* be a misfortune in its prospect, but it would be a *greater* misfortune to remove our means by which the value of life is recognized. Therefore, death as an instrumental good has a greater value than the badness death can bring to our individual lives, because its instrumental value is necessary for regarding life as such as valuable, as well as many of the human values that we come to desire.

I suggest that the balance between the objective value of death as such and the subject value of our individual lives is a judgment for one's psychology. However, it must be noted that the fact of death is *always*

instrumentally good, while the individual value of one's own death is relative to an individual's categorical desires (the prospect of an individual's death can be bad at times when categorical desires are present, and can be good at times when life is no longer desirable). But the instrumental good that death brings to the value of life does not, as Lucretius claims, make it irrational to regard the prospect of one's own death as an evil. So the claim that the finitude of life is always instrumentally good does not take away from the fact that the finitude of our individual lives can present itself as a misfortune to be avoided. It merely claims that it is irrational to regard life's being finite as an evil. The instrumental value of death we identified in the consideration of immortality has therefore led us to the same conclusion that Epicurus held from his arguments against the badness of death: the finitude of life is 'a matter for contentment, not by adding a limitless time [to life] but by removing the longing for immortality.'<sup>143</sup>

## **5.2 Death is Nothing To Us: A Re-Examination**

In Chapter One, we discussed the Epicurean position on the nature of death and identified two arguments that reached the conclusion that 'death is nothing to us'.<sup>144</sup> (HA) held that all goods and bads that can befall one must be experienced through the sensations of pleasure and pain, since death is the privation of experience, death can neither be good nor bad for the one who dies. (EA) held that a state of affairs can only be good or bad for a person if that person exists at a time in which the state of affairs occurs, since death is the privation of a person's existence, death cannot be good or bad for the person who died. From these two arguments, the Epicureans concluded with three claims regarding death: (1) it is irrational to fear death, (2) death should be regarded with an attitude of indifference, (3) we should make the finitude of life a matter for contentment.

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<sup>143</sup> Epicurus (1964) 417.

<sup>144</sup> Epicurus (1964) and Lucretius (1995).

In Chapter One I argued against the Epicureans that the three claims pertaining to how we should regard death could be reached from (HA) and (EA) alone. I claimed that the fact of death is relevant to us while we are alive as we are aware that as finite beings, our lives will inevitably end in death. Accordingly, I explained that knowledge that death cannot be bad for us once it occurs (as one no longer exists once dead) is insufficient to justify changing our attitudes towards our future deaths. I also argued that Lucretius' (SA)—which holds that it is irrational to regard our posthumous non-existence as an evil since the equal state of non-existence, our prenatal non-existence, is not regarded as such—was only sufficient to defend Epicurus' argument that a state of affairs cannot be bad for one at a time when one no longer exists. So (SA) defends the argument that the state of being dead cannot be bad for the one who died and should not be regarded as such, but it could not provide any additional explanation pertaining to why the termination of life should not be regarded as an evil. Though (BA) held that there is an instrumental value to the finitude of life, it too could not warrant a change in our attitudes towards our future deaths, as it also claims that it can be a misfortune to die before or after the appropriate termination to life.

By contrast, in this chapter however I have argued that we should make the finitude of life a matter of contentment, as Epicurus and Lucretius originally claimed. It is imperative to recognize that the claim that the finitude of life is a matter for contentment is not grounded in any argument concerning the fact that death cannot be bad for the person who died. On my account, the finitude of life cannot be an evil because it is a *necessary condition* for which life as such is recognized as valuable. Though Lucretius held a similar claim with his (BA), he also argued that it can be a misfortune to die before or after nature's appropriate termination, but the misfortune of an untimely death did not provide any grounds to regard one's own death as an evil to be avoided, it was only accounted for in terms of a less valuable life. My position must be distinguished from

Lucretius' (BA) as, according to (PA), death is *not* nothing to us—we do have good reasons to regard the prospect of our own deaths as an evil for us—which Lucretius denies. Thus, I ultimately concede to the Epicureans that the finitude of life must be a matter for contentment. This conclusion however, cannot be reached from the arguments provided by the Epicureans, it can only be reached through the correct recognition that an infinite life cannot be a recognizably human life, and it is therefore incomprehensible how such a life could be attractive to us over the alternative to a finite life.

Throughout this thesis, I have defended the Epicurean arguments (HA) and (EA) from the objections raised by the anti-Epicureans. I argued that the state of being dead, and death *simpliciter*, cannot be bad for the person who dies because once dead, a person, and any grounds for his misfortune, cease to exist. Given my defense of the Epicurean arguments against their antagonists, as well as my conclusion that the finitude of life cannot be an evil, it may be questionable to what extent my position is really a middle ground position between the Epicureans and Williams. To clarify my position on the nature of death and its moral implications, as distinguished from the Epicureans and Williams, it is useful to re-examine my arguments in comparison to those of the Epicureans and Williams'.

The Epicureans famously argued that 'death is nothing to us'. This expression was used to explain that neither the state of being dead, nor death, could be of moral worth for the person who dies, as one no longer exists as a subject of possible experience, which is a necessary condition to be morally wronged or benefited. I defended the Epicurean claim that the state of being dead is nothing to us, and though I also conceded that death *simpliciter* is also nothing to us, I argued that the fact of death is morally relevant to living persons.

In Chapter Three, I defended Williams' claim that categorical desires provide a disutility for which death can rationally be regarded as

an evil. Against Williams however, I argued that categorical desires cannot determine that death *simpliciter* is an evil, as it cannot account for how a person can be the subject of misfortune at a time when a person no longer exists. Therefore Williams' argument against death could not present a plausible objection to the Epicurean (HA) and (EA). However, in defense of Williams' notion of categorical desires, I proposed an argument (PA), which held that we can attach a disutility to the *prospect* of our individual deaths so that our deaths could rationally be regarded as an evil for us if it would prevent the fulfillment of our categorical desires.<sup>145</sup> Given (PA), I demonstrated against the Epicureans, that death could rationally be feared and be regarded as an evil. As (PA) does not hold that death is an evil in itself, it is only rational to fear death and regard death to be an evil on the grounds that there is a disutility involved with death. Accordingly, (PA) concedes to the Epicureans that it would be irrational to fear death or regard it to be an evil because one believes that there is something bad about death, or the state of being dead, as such.

(PA) also provided us with good reason to reject the Epicurean claim that the finitude of life cannot be bad for us. With (PA), we saw that our lives could accumulate value through the satisfaction of our desires beyond the boundaries of the natural termination of life. But Chapter Four determined that the finitude of life is a necessary condition for the value of life as such and that many of our human values rely on the finite temporal structure of life. I therefore argued that an indefinite life cannot present a desirable alternative to our finite life, because life as such would not be recognized as valuable. In this chapter, I have argued that the finitude of life is instrumentally good as it provides the recognition that life itself is valuable. Although I ultimately agree with the Epicureans that the finitude

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<sup>145</sup> Equally, I claimed that death can be regarded as good for us if life is no longer worth living and death brings the end to an impoverished existence. However, death can only be regarded as good if there is a utility to death, so one must have the negative categorical desire for one's life to end in order for the prospect of death to be rationally regarded as an evil. In the case where there are not any positive or negative categorical desires that death can prevent or satisfy then death is, as the Epicureans claimed, 'nothing to us'.

of life cannot be an evil, this conclusion was not reached from the Epicurean arguments against the badness of death, and I maintain that (HA) and (EA) are insufficient to justify changing our attitudes towards our future deaths and the finitude of life. Nonetheless, the instrumental good of the finitude of life that we arrived at through the consideration of immortality should make us realize that the finitude of life cannot be an evil; it is a necessary condition for the recognition that life as such is valuable.

Although my arguments pertaining to the nature of death and its moral implications have yielded several of the Epicurean conclusions, my position still negotiates a middle ground between the Epicureans and Williams, as (PA) accounts for the intuition that it *is* rational to fear death and regard it as an evil to be avoided. I have therefore reached three of the Epicurean conclusions pertaining to the moral worth of the nature of death: (1) that the state of being dead is nothing to us, (2) death *simpliciter* is nothing to us, and (3) the finitude of life is a matter for contentment. But against the Epicureans, I have argued that we can rationally fear our future deaths, as categorical desires provide a disutility by which the prospect of death is rationally held as an evil to be avoided. Finally, I also claimed against the Epicureans, that the prospect of death can rationally be regarded as morally good for one if one no longer desires to continue living.

### **5.3 Conclusion**

I began this thesis with the suggestion that in part, the Epicureans were right: death—when it occurs—is nothing to us. I went on to defend the Epicurean position against the objections raised by the deprivation theorists and Williams. I argued that the state of being dead, and death *simpliciter*, cannot be an evil of deprivation or prevention for the person who dies because (once dead), the person—and the grounds for any misfortune—cease to exist. I accounted for the anti-Epicurean intuition



that it is rational to fear death and to regard death as an evil to be avoided, not because death *simpliciter* is bad, but rather because the prospect of our deaths may be presented to us as bad for us if our deaths would prevent the satisfaction of our categorical desires. Though we have good reasons to rationally regard the prospect of our own death as an evil for us, the fact that life is finite cannot be an evil and is in fact instrumentally good, because it takes the threat of losing life to recognize that life as such is valuable. In this chapter, I concluded that even though death cannot be of any moral worth for us once it occurs, we can attach two distinct values to death while we are alive: we can attach a value of disutility (or utility) to the prospect of our own individual deaths, and we must attach an instrumentally good value to the fact of death as such. How to decide on the balance of those values is a matter for psychological judgment.

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