

Living while dying: Reflections on death's harm, finitude, meaning, and uncertainty

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Abstract:

Death as a topic of philosophical investigation has been enjoying something of a resurrection in recent literature. Much of the discussion has dealt with the question of its harm, whether or not it ought to be considered an evil, and the degree to which it deprives us of a good, if indeed it does. The following covers and comments on these positions from the perspective of how we ought to regard our own personal future deaths before then extending the analysis to consider the anti-natalist challenge and finding meaning through finitude, maintaining its focus on the particular throughout. The final section explores the often unacknowledged degree of uncertainty that we live under, why we are so poor at recognizing it, how this affects our decision-making, and how that in turn relates to how we view our personal deaths. Some suggestions for how we may consider our approaching deaths are given based on the results of each section.

Keywords:

anti-natalist; death; finitude; harm; meaning; uncertainty

I. Not me

Despite hearing or seeing reports about it on an almost daily basis, death is one of the topics that we find it easiest to forget. The problem is that those deaths, those dry statistics relating numbers involved and manners of passing, that float through our ears or glide by our eyes are always about someone else, typically mercifully far away, and completely unknown to us. We can ignore anything as long as it has no direct affect on us, and when it does affect us we can find ways of minimizing its impact, until, of course, *we* are the ones dying, but then we are dead and need not be bothered about it. Or so the well-known story goes. Perhaps mirroring popular culture with its current zombie craze, death as an academic philosophical topic has recently enjoyed its own undead resurrection, with the past few years seeing an upsurge in articles discussing arguments like the Epicurean one just alluded to and its cousins in the Classical world and distant progeny of contemporary times. Much of this literature has focused on the question of harm as it relates to death, whether or not death is a harm, and if so to what extent and in what way.

The following will briefly cover and comment on these ideas primarily as a way to delineate and define our intuitions on the subject before turning to what I believe are three areas that have been unduly neglected in the study of death or are deserving of further attention. First amongst these will be the anti-natalist's powerful challenge to our intuition that it is good to have been born and some implications for seeing value in the lives that we did not ourselves choose to start. Next we will consider finitude and the central place it plays in helping us to come to terms with that most

terrifying of all deaths – our own – and how such can be used to find a meaning to life and death, to find meaning in life in the face of death. We will then finally link meaning and finitude in with the fact of life’s uncertainty which we regularly fail to see, and how this ubiquitous human deficiency relates to the psychology of decision-making. Throughout a single central question will guide our explorations: How should we view our personal, future deaths? Yet even having limited the focus of our subject in the way we have, death is still such a broad topic that we will have to paint with broad strokes and approach it from a number of angles. The sections below may therefore appear somewhat disparate but each will provide a partial answer to our governing question; given the limitations in understanding what must be essentially unknown, this is perhaps the best we can do.

Once born, death is the only guarantee we have in life, and as such is something that deserves recognition, reflection, forethought, and fortitude. We can live, and perhaps even live better, with one eye on our graves. With this in mind the present study will concentrate entirely on how we might think about our own deaths, and will not consider the related issues of the deaths of those close to us, of other known and unknown people, of death in its concrete form (a physically present corpse) versus its abstract form (the idea of death generally), the debate regarding the medical definitions of death, or the means by which death may be arrived at.

II. Harm: Deprivation, immortality, and the question of evil

The Epicurean challenge to our common-sense view that death is bad for us is found in his ‘Letter to Menoeceus’ and reads (in part):

Death, therefore, the most awful of evils, is nothing to us, seeing that, when we are, death is not come, and when death is come, we are not. It is nothing, then, either to the living or to the dead, for with the living it is not and the dead exist no longer.²

In essence, Epicurus’ argument is that when we are alive we aren’t dead and therefore shouldn’t care about it, and when we are dead we can’t care about it – or anything else – as we no longer exist. Stephen Rosenbaum rightly highlights that approaching this view through the rough lens of ‘death’ is inadequate as it fails to distinguish death as a state versus dying as a process, something which is experienced by us while we exist and about which we presumably should (and do) care.³ When we think of ourselves as being dead, as being in that condition wherein what ‘we’ were has altogether ceased to exist (and this holds too for those who believe in a soul; for whatever we may or may not be in addition to our physical bodies, our current inhabited bodies surely play a part in how we consider ourselves to be ‘me’), we have trouble imagining that as a state of suffering. If we do think that there may be suffering postmortem, that suffering will be inflicted on our soul or other part of what we are now that remains in a way meaningful to us (some have here suggested, for example, one’s reputation), not on the whole that we are while alive. If we do not believe in a soul or any part of us that does remain meaningfully after death, then Epicurus’ statements apply most directly: we no longer exist and death (and everything) is nothing.

There are however, at least two ways in which thinking of the state of death can harm us now, and those are in the process of dying and the fact of futurelessness. Regarding the former, it seems entirely rational to worry (although not to obsess) about the way one will come to arrive at the state of death, particularly if one’s family has a history of certain painful and drawn-out illnesses. There are many terrible routes by which a person may die, some so horrific that it would be cruel to wish them on anyone, even accounting for the monstrous behavior that some of us engage in. One example would be Locked-in syndrome, which can be caused by a stroke, a brain hemorrhage, injury,

overdose, or certain diseases (Lou Gehrig's disease, Multiple Sclerosis).⁴ Patients with this condition are fully conscious but unable to communicate or move any of their voluntary muscles save their eyes (except for patients with Total locked-in syndrome, whose eye muscles are also paralyzed); some ninety-percent of people with this condition pass away within the first four months after they have entered it,⁵ something many of us will consider to be a mercy. If a person has even the slightest reason to think that this is how they might meet their end, the resulting mental distress will clearly be a harm to them, as would speculating ahead to a period of slowly dying via cancer, HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, or simply succumbing to old age following an extended period of an abnormally intense loss of one's self-determination, freedom, and dignity.

The other way in which thinking about our eventual death can be a harm to us now is through futurelessness. Samuel Scheffler argues that the act of attaching value to something is necessarily directed towards the future, and that the fact of death, with its full stoppage of agency, is therefore a threat to valuing. How can we truly value a thing, activity, or whatever, that we won't be able to protect or promote – or do anything at all about – once we are dead?⁶ How can we attach value to our own lives knowing that they too will end and that henceforth we will, sooner or later, be forgotten? People typically overcome this problem by identifying with communities and traditions that will survive them and that share a common concern for what they personally value.⁷ This is a good response for life's tangibles (and certain intangibles as well, such as ritual activities, ideas, ways of life, etc.), yet it does not tell us how we can find meaning in our own lives facing our own personal extinction, our necessary futurelessness. In her review of Scheffler's book, Amia Srinivasan comments that her previous religiously-based beliefs in a self that continues beyond death allowed her to sidestep the issue of fearing it, but that 'Now I do believe in death [that is, the complete cessation of the self], and the terror I have of it – when I can bring myself to think about it – is debilitating.'⁸ Many of us will know exactly how she feels, and the very important issue of finding meaning in the light of unstoppable individual finitude will be returned to in the fourth section of the present paper.

Death can therefore harm us before we die, even if we grant Epicurus that the state of death itself is not a harm, by acting on us while we are alive through the way that we approach it. Death has also been thought to harm us by taking away from us something that we (usually) consider to be a great good – life itself. Thomas Nagel writes that 'But if death is an evil, it is the *loss of life*, rather than the state of being dead, or non-existent, or unconscious that is objectionable.'⁹ Rosenbaum replies to this thought by stating that for something to be bad for someone it must be experienceable, and not necessarily experienced by, the person.¹⁰ This is an intriguing challenge and, if it holds, would do much damage to the entire line of reasoning that counts death as a harm by virtue of its being a deprivation of a good. How can a loss of life be experienceable by the person who would experience it if they have ceased to exist?

In order to see if Rosenbaum's experienceable objection can withstand scrutiny, allow me to introduce another case for consideration that has often come up in the literature on death – that of immortality. Mikel Burley relates how both Timothy Chappell (2007 online; print 2009) and Bernard Williams (1993 [1973]) in the debates on the desirability of immortality see death as an interruption of ongoing worthwhile projects (and that those projects are both meaningful and meaning generating), and therefore reason that we should think of death as an evil.¹¹ By this account, death is bad for us because it halts an otherwise endlessly continuing good, that of the projects we choose to engage ourselves in. However, it should be noted that here too the cessation of those projects would not be experienceable by a person if brought about by death, and if the person is immortal and their projects are nevertheless stopped for whatever reason, then the evil is the inability to keep doing the projects (or the cause of that inability), not death. Chappell and Williams are concerned that we see death as an evil by virtue of linking the negative results

that it engenders (the halting of projects) with the condition that it brings about (the state of being dead). Here, perhaps uniquely, we have the results, the causal process, and the final conditional state all coming together into one single concept; death has suddenly become something very difficult to pin down. Moreover, although the waves of start-continue-finish that define projects are important to many, not everyone needs such to find meaning in life (a subject we shall revisit later); Rosenbaum has not yet been answered, experienceability seems still to be tied to living, and the harm that comes from the deprivation of good things can, in one way or another, be tied to causes other than death. Another possible response comes via Roy Sorensen, who enlists David Lewis' notion of 'personal time' to try and explain what it is about death that gives it its sting; that time is not fixed to an external point but to the experience of the person whose time it is, to whom it 'belongs' in a sense.¹² Whereas we may feel as if death takes away from us personal time we could have had, in the case of an immortal person this would not, of course, apply. No time can be taken away because the very idea of personal time is irrelevant to them. How, then, would an immortal person think about time? It's hard for us, fleeting as our lives are, to even imagine but it would seem that their one inexperienceable would be death, and again we find that Rosenbaum's challenge remains unanswered; death is not experienceable for us because we are not capable of experience postmortem, and death is not experienceable for immortals because they are not capable of it. If for something to be bad for someone it must be experienceable, then it appears that death is not bad for mortals, and nor is it (obviously enough) bad for immortals.

To insist that death is a harm because it robs us of a good that we would otherwise have is to confuse a life-life comparison with a life-death comparison; this is, as Harry Silverstein puts it, 'in effect, to conflate death with an alternative sort of life' and does not really reply to the 'no subject' challenge¹³ we have been considering via Epicurus and Rosenbaum. On a final note, the Stoic/Plotinian/Epicurean line of thought would also remind us that when considering the deprivation argument we should remember that 'longer is not more', and that future happiness is not mine now.¹⁴ Nor, we may add, is future sadness. If anything, it is the uncertainties of the future that we miss out on by dying, and that is a necessarily mixed-bag, examining the contents of which will form the closing section of this paper. We therefore come back to our opening considerations of death as a harm because of how we think about it now – something that is experienceable – rather than as a harm in any ultimate sense. We say to Rosenbaum (with a bow to Epicurus' memory) that, yes, you're right, but, as Fred Feldman points out, death can still be overall bad for a person even if it is not intrinsically bad.¹⁵ The idea of a future death harms us while alive, but that is an aspect of our lives that we can do something about.

The observant reader will note at this point that I have not discussed Lucretius' famous symmetry argument. I believe that the main propositions involved can be tied into the broader ones that we have already discussed here, and so we need only note in passing that any concern for the time prior to our existence does not take note of the future-directed nature of our emotions¹⁶ (nor our values, as elaborated above), and that anyway we haven't found death as such to be a harm, but rather the attitude we take towards it (our approach to the process of dying and the fact of futurelessness) is what is harmful. That is, how we think about death now as living beings is what makes it seem harmful to us. How then ought we to consider it? To consider nonexistence? We will return to these questions in the fourth section after first considering the anti-natalist challenge as presented by David Benatar.

III. Is it really better never to have been?

Better Never to Have Been is the title of David Benatar's much discussed, but perhaps not yet well enough debated, book.¹⁷ In it, he lays out the anti-natalist position that all people would have been better off never having been born and that it would both be better for humanity to go extinct and that extinction should preferably happen sooner rather

than later. Benatar bases his argument that coming into existence is always a harm on his reasoning that the absence of bad things is good even without anyone to enjoy that good, but the absence of good things is negative only if someone is deprived of said good things. Therefore, the lack of bad by not existing beats losing out on some good by also not existing; that is to say, the bad is worse than the good is good.¹⁸ Benatar states that the perspective from which such judgments are made is ‘with reference to the (potential) interests of a person who either does or does not exist.’¹⁹ This asymmetry between bad and good is the crux of Benatar’s book, though he does supplement it with an additional argument for those who reject the claim (that of suffering, to be discussed below). Benatar believes further that this asymmetry yields a duty to ‘avoid creating unhappy people’ that is ‘grounded in the interests of potential people’ but no duty to ‘create happy people’ with the same potential-person grounding condition.²⁰

What is most important to keep in mind when considering Benatar’s arguments is the above perspective from which we are to judge, that of the real or potential interests of a person who either exists now, will exist, or may never exist; in short, the (potential) interests of potential people. For the sake of simplicity, in the following I will use the preceding shorthand for this perspective when discussing Benatar’s arguments. In defending his asymmetry thesis, Benatar starts from the (naturally justified) assumption that all lives will include both some pleasure and some pain, the degree of each of course varying by person. He then compares the presence of pain and pleasure in the case that a person exists with the absence of pain and pleasure in the case that the person does not exist. The presence of pain where person X exists is labeled ‘bad’, and the absence of pain where X does not exist is labeled ‘good’. The presence of pleasure where X exists is also labeled ‘good’ but the absence of pleasure where X does not exist is labeled ‘not bad’ rather than ‘bad’. The reasons Benatar gives for this seeming incongruence (between ‘good’ and ‘not bad’ instead of the standard ‘good’-‘bad’) stem from his views on deprivation: that if we judge retrospectively only bringing someone into existence (and not failing to do so) ‘can be regretted *for* the sake of the person whose existence was contingent on our decision’; that we regret for an ‘indeterminate but existent person [a stranger living far away, say]’ their lacking a good but we can’t for someone who never exists, and that grief in not having children is grief for ourselves, not for the child who missed out.²¹ Later Benatar similarly states that absent pleasures that deprive are “bad” in the sense of “worse” and therefore absent pleasures that don’t deprive (because X does not exist) are “not bad” in the sense of “not worse”. They are not worse than the presence of pleasures’ because they don’t deprive as the person doesn’t exist.²²

I would like to reply to the above by once more grounding our considerations in the same way that Benatar does – in the (potential) interests of potential people. If this is our approach, then I cannot see how absent pleasures can be anything but bad, and ‘bad’ in the standard sense, not in Benatar’s sense of ‘not worse’. They are a missing out in the same way that absent pains are a missing out by this very argument. If we are considering the (potential) interests of potential people, then we ought to think in specifics: Is it regrettable that this potential person missed out on the good he would have had by not existing to enjoy that good awaiting him? We must say that yes, it’s unfortunate that he missed out on that. Benatar disagrees, and cites Jeff McMahan (2002) that ‘there is no strong moral reason to cause a person to exist just because his life would contain much good’;²³ Benatar claims that this is a widely-held and general intuition, and roots his argument there. Yet this glosses *causing a person to exist with regretting nonexistence when considering the (potential) interests of potential people*. If we are thinking of their interests – the (potential) interests of potential people – were they to exist, then they would be deprived because they did not in fact exist. This does not mean that we have a duty to create them, but, specifically, we can regret the results. Moreover, the connection Benatar draws between ‘not bad’ and ‘not worse’ doesn’t work; if the person doesn’t exist then both pleasures and absent pleasures are nothing at all, and if the person is considered from the (potential) interests of potential people point of view then absent pleasures are in fact worse. One can’t have it both ways with the nonexistent. The failure to

solidly ground the case for asymmetry puts all of the conclusions that follow from it in grave doubt.

However, Benatar anticipates that some will find reason to dismiss his arguments from asymmetry and therefore provides a secondary argument for why it would have been better for every living person to never have come into existence, and that is that the world is a place of suffering. As examples of this, Benatar lists some statistics on death from natural disasters, hunger (and malnutrition which does not lead directly to death), fatal diseases, and government and privately-inflicted killings, noting as well that for each death there are numerous people who are bereaved and suffer in that way.²⁴ To this list Benatar adds the non-lethal sufferings of rape, assault, maiming, certain cultural practices like female circumcision, slavery, and ‘shunning, betrayal, humiliation, and intimidation, not to mention oppression in its myriad forms.’²⁵

These are indeed terribly tragic events, particularly the ones that can easily be avoided through direct human action and a change in thinking/behavior, but such statistics are misapplied when they are inferred to represent abstract and continuous suffering rather than the instances of suffering and the resultant consequences thereof that they do actually represent. There can be no doubt that those very unfortunate young women who are physically mutilated because they were unlucky enough to be born into a group that practices female ‘circumcision’ will have further suffering in their lives because of what was done to them, but that does not mean that they will consider their entire lives to be endless suffering. Jonathan Haidt remarks that when studying groups of Indian prostitutes who were living in what can only be described as horrid conditions he was surprised to find out how generally happy many of them actually were.²⁶ Some victims of events like the ones Benatar lists will also suffer from ongoing psychological trauma, and again, this cannot and should not be discounted, but it also does not mean that they will necessarily contend that their existence itself is suffering.

Along those lines, Benatar lists three psychological traits inherent in human beings that cause us to see our lives as more positive than they may be (Pollyannaism, adapting to new circumstances and adjusting expectations, and comparing ourselves with others to see how we’re doing),²⁷ and findings like Haidt’s could well be the results of these traits, but this tendency towards optimism seems to be much more of a blessing than a curse. Even granting that our lives may not be as good as we think they are by the non-subjective standards of the hedonistic, desire fulfillment, and objective list theories that Benatar discusses,²⁸ it does not mean that we should give up on human life (or more, as Benatar extends his case to include all sentient beings). I see it rather as a challenge to do better, to caretake the planet better, to be worthy of the optimism that is built into us. Unspeakable suffering is endured by people all over this planet every day, I would not argue against that, but as the foregoing has attempted to show, the anti-natalist conclusions that Benatar draws from the fact of suffering appear to be unwarranted. Given that, and whatever our own views may be regarding whether or not we personally choose to have children, we who are living can see that it is possible to find value in being, and that indeed most of us do just that.

How, though, should we consider that being in light of its ceasing? How should we who have been brought into existence think about our upcoming nonexistence? Since we can reject the asymmetry upon which Benatar builds his anti-natalist view, and since we can see that his additional argument on suffering misapplies parts to the whole, we are able to acknowledge that having come into existence is not a harm. We are therefore also able to rationally view our existence for the positive that we intuitively take it to be, and this in turn can (and generally does) engender feelings of gratitude in us. Although we know death will someday come, we can be thankful for the time we’ve had rather than seeing death as a welcome end to the trouble of being that Benatar’s conclusions imply. This shines a very positive light on the past (including the trials we’ve come through) and the present. The lesson we take from

rejecting the anti-natalist view regarding how we look at our own future death is to be delighted that it has not happened yet. This may not be of much comfort in itself, but when combined with the meaning that can be taken from an acceptance of our finitude its impact on our approach to death will expand. That is the matter we will take up in the next section.

IV. Finding meaning in and through (despite?) our finitude

If we accept the argument presented in the second section, that the state of death itself is not a harm to us but rather the harm comes from the view we take of dying as a process and of our necessary futurelessness, we see that the main obstacle to meaning is this fact of finitude. What possible meaning can life have when it is so short, is followed by nothing for us, and when we are guaranteed that the memories the still living carry of us after our deaths will not last more than – at best – a few generations? Simon Critchley puts it succinctly when he notes that ‘under the nihilistic conditions of modernity, the question of the meaning of life becomes a matter of finding a meaning to human finitude.’²⁹ Critchley also cites what he calls Stanley Cavell’s central insight of ‘*the need for an acceptance of human finitude as that which cannot be overcome*’, neither in a Christian redemptive sense nor in a Zarathustran overman sense.³⁰ This is what I think disturbs us so much about death. It is not death itself but *dying*, and not dying in a starkly literal sense (e.g. through a drawn-out, painful disease), but in a prolonged literal sense, a sneaking sense, where at whatever point it occurs we realize that we are dying, that we are finite and will – soon or sooner – cease. It is this (rude) awakening that so threatens our heretofore secure sense of self. Perhaps, then, what would suit us better for *living* would be an early and ongoing awareness of our finitude, a living while dying.

Just such an awareness, though, has been deemed impossible. An aphorism from E.M. Cioran tells us that:

Deep inside, each man feels – and believes – himself to be immortal, even if he knows he will perish the next moment. We can understand everything, admit everything, *realize* everything, except our death, even when we ponder it unremittingly and even when we are resigned to it.³¹

Critchley too writes that we cannot really understand our own finitude, it is a ‘radical ungraspability’ and we are stuck with an ‘inability to lay hold of death and make of it a work and to make that work the basis for an affirmation of life.’³² However, we are later shown to be in a bind, what we cannot do is just what we need, for Critchley also relates that ‘If death is not just going to have the character of a brute fact, then one’s mortality is something that one has to project freely as the product of a resolute decision.’³³ We cannot take death and use it to affirm our lives, but we need to willfully take it and place it before us, as out there, as recognized and assigned with manifest importance, else it becomes simply a piece of information. How can we use that which we cannot work with in this willful fashion? There is, it seems to me, a way out of this conundrum, an approach that can reconcile our failure to really know death in a way that we can turn it into something foundational with our need to see it as chosen, as accepted, as embraced. Our path is to affirm it – in a sideways manner – as it is, as a brute fact, as mere datum, and not as a decision outright, not as a seeking, and not as a romanticization. This does not entail saying Critchley’s ‘I can’ to death (if I can),³⁴ but simply ‘I do’. I know I am going to die, I acknowledge that fact of my biological basis, I admit that I don’t like it but also that there is absolutely nothing I can do about it. I remind myself of this daily, even countless times during the day. We are here tempted to object that surely there must be more to it than that? Death appears to hover over us with such enormity that we respond to it with heavily laden imagery, our deep longing to just go on living manifesting itself in countless dreams of an afterlife. We either cling to the unknown as the possibility of *something* or invest it with its own dark and terrible beauty. The former tendency is very familiar to us,

stretching as it does from Hades to Heaven, while another Cioran aphorism will aptly illustrate the latter's resultant romanticization of death. Even this disavowal of the beyond ends up leading us astray from the 'I do' and its more tranquil, but marked by an admitted nonunderstanding, point of view:

Life is nothing; death, everything. Yet there *is* nothing which is death, independent of life. It is precisely this absence of autonomous, distinct reality which makes death universal; it has no realm of its own, it is omnipresent, like everything which lacks identity, limit and bearing: an indecent infinitude.³⁵

Cioran's words have a beauty and a depth to them which is then lent, perhaps unintentionally, to their subject, and we once more see in them a failure to cast death as the callous process that it is: an ending, a nothing upon which nothing can be imposed, valueless. We cannot affirm life through death because attempting to do so is like trying to chew on our own tails. We are here, we are alive, we will die, and there is nothing more that can be said. We accept finitude because we must, grateful for our now, for the calamities we have not (yet) met, we do set goals for our lives but we pursue them for the pursuit's sake, not for their fulfillment. If we are able to find success here and there, to achieve our aims, we consider ourselves to be amongst the truly fortunate. We did not ask to be born but we are thankful to be the kind of creatures that can contemplate it.

Steven Luper would take issue with me on this point. He argues that meaning is found precisely in attaining our pursuits, that 'Your life has meaning just if, and to the extent that, you achieve the aims that you devote to it freely and competently... These achievements are *the* meaning of your life.'³⁶ To my mind, the 'and to the extent that' part especially seems likely to lead to a high degree of distress if we take Luper's definition at face value. Far too much is beyond our control and the outcomes and consequences of our circumstances and actions far too prone to random results and unreachable forces for us to be able to confidently achieve our goals to the degree we'd like; this is an important point and it will be illustrated and examined in the final section. For now, it is enough to respond to Luper's assertion by noting that facing the limitations in feasible effects that we do, it is therefore likely wiser to instead focus on the quest, the challenge, of attaining the goals one has set oneself, with hope for a happy outcome even if it remains just that – a hope. Luper too notes that 'striving to accomplish things we regard as worth doing leads to happiness as a side-effect';³⁷ that side-effect should be satisfactory enough to keep us engaged in our pursuits, and to take from our efforts what fulfillment and purpose we can, never mind the actual results. Similarly, Noah Lemos offers welfare, 'choiceworthiness', and ethical preferability as ways to consider the value of a life, if it is (was) good or not,³⁸ and perhaps we can consider such criteria to be alternatives to Luper's achievementism. Furthermore, Luper finds meaning as being tied in with desire fulfillment, and argues that those desires must be unconditional if they are to compel us to continue living, something that conditional desires cannot do.³⁹ The backing such thoughts contain (Luper cites Williams' 'The Makropulos Case' in support) notwithstanding, I cannot help but think that such a stance is setting ourselves up for a fall. Unconditional desires may well fill our lives with more substance than conditional desires do, but I do not see them as a necessary prerequisite to remaining alive, nor would most people I've encountered. Except for the very thoughtful amongst us, we tend to carry on simply because we carry on; finding joy in life whenever we are able to. Moreover, as above, it is more properly in the pursuit of those desires that we should discover and create meaning for ourselves, embracing contingency for the outcomes of our struggles are never entirely up to us. Our condition as the kind of creatures we are is such that we stumble into life presented by a world which awes us and a selection of choices which always appear to be more numerous than they actually are; by not realizing the uncertainty upon which so many of the results we base our decisions on depend, we think of ourselves as being far more in charge than a sober analysis would warrant, as the below will attempt to demonstrate in more detail. While achieving our goals and having our desires fulfilled are undoubtedly positive

developments for us, staking our life's meaning on them is like building a sandcastle right on the shore and then attempting to move in. This is very rarely a good idea.

What, then, can we apply from an embrace of finitude and a focus on taking meaning from the pursuit of objectives rather than their attainment to our central issue of how we might more beneficially regard our coming deaths? As Critchley and Cioran point out, our own finitude is a concept that we intellectually understand – in a definitional sense, at least – but don't ever really acknowledge. Not really. Yet it is something that we need to feel in our bones, something that we need to make a core part of ourselves and a core practice of our daily lives. Towards this end I would like to suggest cultivating a sense of gratitude for simply being alive, taking the time each day to reflect on the fact that although we will die, now we live: in this moment, at this place. If we are able to do so, we will find an appreciation of the present forming in us, and that in turn will help us to establish meaning for our lives through what we choose to do in them, through the pursuits that we take on regardless of the effectiveness of our efforts. Death is there waiting for us, we can know that – deeply –, we can say 'I do' to it even as we smile at its 'not now'.

V. Uncertainty and decision-making

In this final section we will connect the theme of meaning in finitude with the condition of uncertainty in which we live by broadly explaining the psychological processes involved in our judgments of probability and decision-making and then by applying that understanding to the suggestions on viewing our own lived journeys towards death along the lines outlined above. Once we are aware of the scope of uncertainty in our lives and why we often fail to recognize it, and understand what the research has revealed about how we make our decisions, we will be in a better position to think about how we should think about our upcoming deaths. First though, I wish to offer some illustrative examples of the uncertainty that marks our lives and makes even our very best plans always somewhat questionable.

In *Operation Massacre*⁴⁰ Rodolfo Walsh chronicles what happened to twelve men caught up in events they could hardly imagine through a combination of background circumstances and extraordinary bad luck. The men had gathered late on the night of June 9th, 1956, at an apartment in northwestern Buenos Aires to listen to a boxing match on the radio when the police suddenly burst in, arrested all of them, and took them into custody. Unbeknownst to all but two or three of the men (the exact details are necessarily fuzzy due to what followed), a Peronist uprising against the recently established military junta erupted that night and the police had reason to think that one of the two generals leading the uprising would either be at the apartment in question or would have visited there that evening. The men were never formally charged, and after a long night of being kept in an unheated room and periodically questioned they were put into a van and driven some few kilometers to an open wasteland, a garbage dump, and told to march, one guard for each prisoner armed with a rifle following behind them. It was at this point that most of them realized they were to be executed and responded each in their own way, many trying to flee, some diving to the ground and playing dead as the panicked policemen started firing, and one falling to his knees and begging for his life. The entire operation was conducted with carelessness from start to finish, and seven of the men survived the night, one severely wounded, several slightly wounded, and several not physically wounded at all. Only one survivor sought legal redress for what happened; the case was eventually put under the jurisdiction of a military court and none of the officers involved were ever found guilty of a criminal offense. Lest we be tempted to dismiss this case as just one more tragic event that occurred in a land far away, we should remember that Argentina's constitution protected those men in the same or a similar manner to which many of the constitutions where we live now protect us, and that what happened to the entirely innocent men in the group (being all or nearly all of them) was a result of

their being swept up under the ordinances of the martial law that was declared sixty to ninety minutes *after* they were arrested on a night that saw both the beginning of an armed and organized revolt and the suppression of the revolutionaries followed by dozens of summary executions. These were ordinary men who found themselves in a situation almost beyond comprehension and responded in the same types of ways that you or I would.

The above example is admittedly an extreme one involving a great many actors and extraordinary circumstances, but uncertainty touches our lives in more personal ways as well. An acquaintance of mine was an avid outdoorsman and in robust health before a sudden stroke left him bedridden and needing physical and speech therapy simply to get back to the normal day-to-day that we take for granted. A few years back a standard urine test in my annual check-up indicated high levels of protein which, after many subsequent tests, revealed that I have a kidney disease. For all I knew I was in fine shape and certainly suspected nothing to be amiss with my internal organs. A series of treatments followed and the symptoms have for now been repressed, but had I been in my birth country (the US) and not my country of residence (Japan), I very likely would not have had the work-sponsored check-up that employers here offer for (and very often require of) their employees and the ticking time bomb in my kidneys would have eventually gone off, meaning – if I survived the initial failure – dialysis and the need for a transplant. Then there are the broad scale natural disasters that leave us completely at their mercy, as well as the many mundane ways in which uncertainty plays an outsized role in shaping our lives, from applications and interviews that fail or succeed based on the mood of the person receiving or conducting them to leaving early or late for work and coming across so-and-so who reminded you of such-and-such to picking up an intriguing book from a used bookstore's shelf and discovering an author that will change your perspective on everything. Our lives are marked by such curiosities, both good and bad.

Of course, we tend to ignore the extraneous factors and think that what happens to us is purely a result of the choices we make, and we often badly misjudge the roles of chance and probability in our lives. This is partly due to how we're wired. In what proved to be a ground-breaking study, Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman describe the results of their research into how we consider the events we perceive around us and the biases we employ when assessing them. We tend to judge probability high where similarity or representativeness is judged to be high, and low where thought to be low, but this can lead to error as it ignores factors which are usually relevant such as prior probability, sample size, et cetera.⁴¹ Tversky and Kahneman write that 'People expect that a sequence of events generated by a random process will represent the essential characteristics of that process, even when the sequence is short',⁴² leading to error as 'a locally representative sequence...contains too many alternations and too few runs'.⁴³ In other words, we look at the small picture and tell ourselves that we understand the big picture; a phenomenon Leonard Mlodinow describes using accessible mathematical principles to ask, in part, 'can a million consecutive zeroes or the success of Wall Street gurus be random?' (both of which, incidentally, are answered in the affirmative).⁴⁴ When we can more easily recall an example of a class of something or a similar event, we think that its frequency and/or probability is higher, and we overestimate the likelihood of conjunctive events and underestimate that for disjunctive events by not adjusting enough from the initial event's probability. This leads us to unwarranted optimism about a plan or project's success (conjunctive), and not enough appreciation of risk in a complex system's failure (disjunctive), where only one essential element need break down to scupper the entire affair.⁴⁵ Tversky and Kahneman again: 'Chance is commonly viewed as a self-correcting process in which deviation in one direction induces a deviation in the opposite direction to restore the equilibrium. In fact, deviations are not "corrected" as a chance process unfolds, they are merely diluted.'⁴⁶

Given this very human trait of failing to see the tenuousness of our circumstances and failing to appreciate the

capriciousness of the outside forces that shape our lives,⁴⁷ how do we tend to make our decisions? If we mistakenly think that our footing is firmer and our paths steadier than they actually are, then surely we make our choices based on the best weighing of the options that we can manage? Again, we may think that is the case, but what the research in the field has revealed shows such rational agent theories to be far from accurate. Kahneman has proposed that there are two systems involved in our thought processes: System 1 is intuitive, fast, automatic, and gives us impressions of percepts and thought objects; System 2 is rational, slow, laborious, and its analyses are always done purposely and explicitly.⁴⁸ Regarding the role that intuition (System 1) plays in our judgments and choices, Kahneman summarizes the two major hypotheses which state that: 1) ‘most behavior is intuitive, skilled, unproblematic, and successful’, and 2) ‘behavior is likely to be anchored in intuitive impressions and intentions even when it is not completely dominated by them.’⁴⁹ I do not believe that an either/or choice must be made between these hypotheses, and indeed my reading of the relevant research indicates that both describe the essential processes involved. Kahneman notes that there is an abundance of evidence that shows that rather than our choices being made inclusive of the related details, expectations, and risks, we instead operate from the narrower view of gains/losses, a perspective that is much further from risk neutrality than a more all-encompassing mental environment would yield.⁵⁰ We tend to focus on the immediate consequences of what we are deciding as they are the most accessible (compared with other considerations), and hence our judgments are driven by affective influences.⁵¹ Other researchers have reinforced the view of emotionally-based intuitions generating a great deal of – if not nearly all of – our decisions to the extent that the theoretical models appear to be quite robust in their generalities, even if they continue to differ in their details.⁵² What appears to happen is that a stimuli generates an affective and intuitive reaction in us, which then either directly generates a behavioral response or heavily influences the slower System 2 analysis which in turn results in a decision and its subsequent action taken (or decidedly not taken, depending on the circumstances).

Within the context of action, Raanan Lipshitz and Orna Strauss define uncertainty as ‘a sense of doubt that blocks or delays action’, elaborating that ‘doubt’ includes 1) incomplete information, 2) too many conflicting meanings from held information, and 3) equally good/bad alternatives.⁵³ Interestingly, Larissa Tiedens and Susan Linton report that our sense of certainty and uncertainty in a given situation itself has an affective base, leading to processing either through the automatic and intuitive channel (System 1) or the deliberative and rational channel (System 2; but again, this comes via System 1 and includes its affective input).⁵⁴ For example, happiness and anger are thought to be associated more with intuitive judgments whereas sadness or neutral feelings align more with reason-based judgments. It is important to note as well that whereas in the former system the source (of, say, an argument) is more attuned to than the content, in the latter content quality is focused upon. Tiedens and Linton attribute this attentional trait directly to our feelings of certainty and uncertainty as both happiness and anger are associated with certainty.⁵⁵ Given our preferences for System 2 type thinking and an argument’s content over its source, it is fortunate for us philosophers that we tend to be such sad people! What can be taken from this review of the psychological processes involved in our decision-making is that although the world we inhabit is quite uncertain, we often feel, and therefore judge, that our anticipated outcomes and expectations are certain, or at least certain to a high degree. This necessarily means that we fail to appreciate the precariousness of our situations, fail to notice the fortuitous occurrences of which we are the beneficiaries, and largely fail to perceive the blinkers affixed to both sides of our faces.

How can this be applied to our central question of how we ought to consider our own deaths, and to the points argued for in the previous sections? We concede that although we are able to choose what we pursue and determine the manner we live in the world which we are embedded in, we can never be fully confident about how things will turn out, and, in fact, we tend to be very poor estimators of probable outcomes. (Mlodinow advises us that we can improve our chances for success through perseverance,⁵⁶ but of course there are no guarantees.) Since we can really

have no idea how our lives will unfold, and because we tend to make (even very important) decisions intuitively and emotionally – at least to some degree – through the psychological systems outlined immediately above, we ought rather to view our lives with a light touch, making plans and holding onto hopes but taking meaning from this now even as we strive for that then. We know death will come, and we recognize and affirm that every day that it is *not yet*, focusing on that joy instead of the anxiety of the unknown. How it will feel and what it will be like when we do actually die is perhaps something that we cannot grasp, cannot fathom, but that does not mean it is something we cannot wrestle with. This is part of what it means to be finite, and to embrace that is to accept death as our only possible destination; under our uncertainty all we can know is that it awaits us, not when or how. Intellectually we know this of course, but we take it for granted, not respecting the fragility of the moment and assuming that we have many years ahead. This is to our detriment. When we do think of death – as we daily ought to – it seems reasonable to see its harm as not being in itself but in how we approach it, the attitude we take towards it. We can say that it is good to exist, to be here now, even as we acknowledge that we are finite and almost sure to be forgotten given enough time, even if we are one of the tiny minority whose names and deeds live on for several thousand years. (That we may consider ourselves in that minority is good evidence of our faulty judgments.) Death, for all its aspects that stand outside of time, is something worth investing our own limited time in. We hold its emphatic *stop* with us as we embrace the go of the everyday, grateful for now, grateful for so far, grateful for not yet.

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