

The Meaning of Death

. . .and its implications for the meaning of life

The Desire for Life

- * ‘The desire to go on living, which is one of our strongest, is essentially first-personal: it is not the desire that a particular, publicly identifiable human being survive, though its fulfillment of course requires the survival of someone like that, and therefore it collides with objective indifference about the survival of anyone in particular. Your relation to your own death is unique, and here if anywhere the subjective standpoint holds a dominant position.’ —Nagel (*VN*, 223-224)

Two Pathways to Immortality: Natural and Preternatural



Two Pathways

- * Preternatural

- * Immortality requires aspects of reality beyond the natural—roughly, that is, beyond the universe explained by natural science

- * Typically, but not necessarily, such approaches are religious in orientation

- * Natural

- * Immortality, or at least *post mortem* existence, can be achieved by scientific means

- * Medical science

- * Computational theories of mind and various cybernetic approaches

Preternatural Pathway

- * In general, this tends to presuppose:
 - * Theism
 - * Mind-Body Dualism
 - * PCC-theory of Personal Identity
 - * If not the PCC-theory in all particulars, then at least an understanding of PCC as a necessary condition for *post mortem* survival

Natural Pathway

- * Cryonics

- * See, for instance, the Cryonics Institute

- * Tends to presupposes the BCC-theory of Personal Identity

- * Cyber

- * Mind (or person) uploading to artificial neural nets

- * Tends to presupposes PCC-theory of Personal Identity

The Epicurean Solution

- * ‘Death is nothing to us, since when death is, we are not, and when we are, death is not.’ —Epicurus (*Letter to Menoeceus*, 122-25 = LS 25 A and 24 B)

More Fully

- * 'Accustom yourself to thinking that death is nothing to us, since every good and every evil resides in sensation, and death is the absence of sensation. Hence, a correct understanding of the fact that death is nothing to us makes the mortality of life enjoyable--not by adding infinite time, but by taking away our yearning for immortality. For there is nothing fearful in living for one who truly concludes that there is nothing fearful in not living. Consequently, he speaks idly who says that he fears death not because of its being painful when present but because it is painful when coming. For if something does not cause pain when present, it is pointless to be pained by the anticipation of it. Therefore, death, the most horrible of evils, is nothing to us, since while we exist death is not present, and whenever death is present, we do not exist. Therefore, death is nothing to the living or the dead: it does not exist for the former, and the latter no longer exist.' —Epicurus (*Letter to Menoeceus* 124-5 = LS 24 A)

Epicurus's Argument

- (1) A subject S can rationally fear at t_1 some state of affairs at t_2 only if S will exist at t_2 .
- (2) So, if t_2 is later than the time of S 's death, S can fear some state of affairs at t_2 only if S exists after death
- (3) S does not exist after S 's death.
- (4) So, S cannot rationally fear any state of affairs after S 's death.

Does this help?

- * ‘The sense each person has of himself from inside is partly insulated from the external view of the person who he is, and it projects itself into the future autonomously, so to speak. My existence seems in this light to be a universe of possibilities that stands by itself, and therefore stands in need of nothing else in order to continue. It comes as a rude shock, then, when this partly buried self-conception collides with the plain fact that TN will die and I with him. This is a very strong form of nothingness, the disappearance of an inner world that had not been thought of as a contingent manifestation at all. . . It turns out that I am not the sort of thing I was unconsciously tempted to think I was: a set of ungrounded possibilities grounded in a contingent actuality. The subjective view process into the future its sense of unconditional possibilities, and the world denies them. It isn't just that they won't be actualized—they will *vanish*.’ (VN, 227-228)