RECENT WORK ON DEATH AND THE MEANING OF LIFE

I shall divide this brief survey piece into three sections. In the first section I discuss some work on the concept of death (and related issues). Here I lay out considerations pertaining to the definitions (both legal and metaphysical) of dying and death, and the issue of why death is a bad thing (for the individual who dies). In the second section I discuss the claim that death is (or can be) a particularly bad thing — a tragedy — for a certain sub-class of sentient creatures: those who are capable of leading a meaningful life. In this section I shall present various accounts of the features in virtue of which an individual is alleged to have the capacity to lead a meaningful life. Also, some claims about the nature of the meaning of life will briefly be discussed. Finally, in the third section I shall point to some work displaying connections between the more abstract conceptual and normative issues broached in the first two sections and some more specific ethical issues.

I. Conceptual Issues. It is useful to recall the distinction between the criterion or criteria of a thing and its concept. The criterion of death is the test of the existence of death. A criterion is a sign or indication of the presence of something. In contrast, our concept of death distills our views about the nature of the phenomenon of death.

The two most prevalent criteria of death are the traditional 'heart-lung' criterion and the 'brain-death' criterion. Of course, there are various different versions of each of these criteria. There is an excellent discussion of these criteria in Karen Grandstrand Gervais, Redefining Death (London: Yale University Press, 1986). Gervais discusses both legal and philosophical aspects of the criteria (and their associated concepts). Further, she usefully distinguishes various approaches to arguing on behalf of the different proposals: biological, moral, and ontological. Although Gervais criticises alternative approaches available in the literature (including certain ontological approaches), she argues for a certain sort of 'redefinition of death' based on ontological considerations. More specifically, she wishes to argue that we ought to understand the death of a human being as the death of a person.

One of the finest treatments of the concept of death is in Fred Feldman, *Confrontations With the Reaper* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992). Feldman begins by exploring the idea that death is the permanent cessation of life; thus, in order to understand what death is, one needs to understand what life is. In exploring the nature of life, Feldman has illuminating things to say about 'life-functional' and 'vitalist' conceptions of life. He argues that even if we cannot precisely define life, we can nevertheless understand it well enough to consider various accounts of death which employ the notion of life as an element. Feldman carefully analyses various such accounts of death, and concludes that they are inadequate; he thus defends a version of the thesis that death is an enigma to us. Although Feldman believes that death is a mystery in the sense that we cannot adequately define it (or give a satisfactory account of its concept), he lays out certain features of the concept of death which he believes help to articulate the structure of the concept of death. Further, he offers perspicuous and incisive answers to various puzzles pertaining to death, such as: Who is the subject of the evil of death? When does this evil take place? Why is death taken to be an evil, whereas prenatal nonexistence is not?


In discussing exactly how death can be a bad thing (an evil or harm) for the individual who dies, the authors of the above works raise deep and interesting questions about the nature of harm. If death is taken to be (what is, of course, controversial) an experiential blank (and thus is taken to involve no unpleasant experiences), then how can it be a bad thing for the individual who dies? One natural and attractive response to this question is that death is bad insofar as it is the deprivation of the good things in life (given that one's life contains at least some such goods). But this response
raises two sorts of questions. First, how can something that does not involve pain, suffering, or any other unpleasant experiences—and which cannot lead to such experiences—be a bad thing for an individual? Second, if the deprivation account of death's badness is correct, then it would appear that it would be rational to have symmetric attitudes toward death and prenatal nonexistence. This is because just as death deprives us of good experiences we would have had, had we died later, our actual date of birth deprives us of goods we would have experienced, had we been born earlier. But we do not intuitively feel that it is appropriate to have symmetric attitudes toward early death and late birth; rather, our attitudes are asymmetric.

As to the first question, various philosophers have argued that there can indeed be things which are bad for an individual but are never in fact experienced as unpleasant or undesirable by the individual. There are arguments for this view in the works by Nagel and Nozick cited above. Nagel gives the example of an individual who is betrayed behind his back; although he never in fact discovers the betrayal, Nagel argues that the betrayal is nevertheless a bad thing for the individual. Thus, such philosophers as Nagel, Nozick, and Feinberg (in the Fischer volume) argue against the view that good and bad can be cashed out ultimately entirely in terms of experiences: they argue against 'experiential ethics'.

Against this view are the followers of Epicurus and Lucretius. For nice historical treatments, see Martha Nussbaum, 'Mortal Immortals: Lucretius on Death and the Voice of Nature', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. i, 1989, pp. 303–351; and Phillip Mitsis, 'Epicurus on Death and the Duration of Life', *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium on Ancient Philosophy*, vol. iv, 1988, pp. 295–314, and *Epicurus' Ethical Theory* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988). Such philosophers point out that even if the betrayal described above is never in fact discovered, it was presumably in some relevant sense possible for the individual to discover it (and subsequently have unpleasant experiences as a result of it). Thus, it is alleged that the opponents of experiential ethics have not provided the requisite sort of example: one in which it is clear that an individual has been harmed and it is nevertheless not possible for him to have any unpleasant experience as a result of the harm. According to these philosophers, anything short of this sort of example is not relevantly similar to death. For such neo-Epicurean argumentation, see the papers of Stephen Rosenbaum in the Fischer anthology.

The dialectic adumbrated above has reached a delicate stage. Examples are adduced by the opponents of experiential ethics which have the feature that they involve an alleged harm to an individual who does not actually suffer as a result of the (alleged) harm. But these examples lack a feature possessed by cases in which an individual is alleged to be harmed by death: in such cases, the individual cannot suffer as a result of the alleged harm (death). Whereas the neo-Epicureans claim that this lack renders the examples irrelevant, it is more reasonable to suppose that it renders them unable decisively to refute experiential ethics. It is an interesting question why one might think that the difference between the examples adduced by the
opponents of experiential ethics and the case of death should make a
difference as to the point at issue — the putative badness of death.

As regards the second question, Thomas Nagel has called the problem of
finding a suitable explanation of the asymmetry in our attitudes toward
death and prenatal nonexistence "the most perplexing feature" of our views
about death. (Nagel, 1986, p. 228) Some (including Nagel in his early piece,
'Death', in Nagel, 1979) have suggested that the asymmetry in attitudes can
be explained in virtue of a deeper metaphysical asymmetry: whereas an
individual might have died later than he actually dies, it is allegedly
metaphysically impossible that an individual should have been born much
earlier than he actually was born. But it is not evident that the pertinent
claim about the time of birth is true. And even if it were, it would appear to
be too arcane to explain the quite general asymmetry in people's attitudes
toward death and prenatal nonexistence. For interesting alternative
explanations of this asymmetry, see Parfit, 1984; Feldman, 1992; and
Brueckner and Fischer (in Fischer, 1993). There is a critical discussion of the
explanation suggested by Brueckner and Fischer in: Ishtiyaque Haji, 'Pre-
pp. 171–180; for a response, see Brueckner and Fischer, 'Death's Badness',
Pacific Philosophical Quarterly, forthcoming.

If death can indeed be a bad thing for the individual who dies, would it
follow that immortality is desirable? Some philosophers have argued that
immortality is necessarily undesirable. Bernard Williams argues for the
necessary undesirability thesis in his interesting and influential paper, 'The
Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality', in Bernard
Williams, Problems of the Self (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,
1973), reprinted in Fischer, 1993. Williams begins with a character in a play
by Karel Capek (which was made into an opera by Janacek). This character
had various names with the initials 'EM'. When she was 42 years of age, her
father gave her an elixir of life which rendered her capable of living forever
(at the biological age of 42). At the time of action of the play, EM is aged 342.
As Williams puts it, "her unending life has come to a state of boredom,
indifference and coldness. Everything is joyless . . .". In the end, she refuses
the elixir and dies, and the formula is destroyed by a young woman (despite
the protests of some older men!).

Williams argues that, necessarily, no individual like you or me could lead
an immortal life which would be attractive; any immortal life (of such an
individual), according to Williams, would of necessity issue in such
conditions as boredom, indifference, and anomie. Against the necessary
undesirability thesis, various philosophers have argued that certain models
of immortality are attractive and do not necessarily lead to (say) boredom
and detachment. In Nagel, 1986, Nagel asks, "Can it be that [Williams] is
more easily bored than I?" (p. 224, n. 3) For further critical discussions of
Williams' position, see Jonathan Glover, Causing Death and Saving Lives
(Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977), and John Martin Fischer and
Ruth Curl, 'Philosophical Models of Immortality in Science Fiction, in
George Schlusser, ed., Proceedings of the 14th Annual J. Lloyd Eaton Conference on
Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature (Athens: University of Georgia Press, forthcoming). In the Eaton Conference volume, there are fascinating discussions of various aspects of immortality as treated in science fiction, and in Fischer, 1993 there is a bibliography of major works of science fiction which treat the topic of immortality. Whereas some science fiction treatments of immortality are as curmudgeonly as that of Bernard Williams (for an excellent discussion, see the contribution of Stanley Rosen to the Eaton volume), other science fiction authors give concrete realisation to Jonathan Glover’s whim, “Given the company of the right people, I would be glad of the chance to sample a few million years and see how it went” (Glover, 1977, p. 57). Interestingly, in Robert Heinlein’s novel, Time Enough for Love (New York, 1974), the protagonist makes the decision for eternal life – precisely the opposite of EM’s decision!


II. Intuitively, and apart from effects on others, we think it is a worse thing when certain sentient creatures die than when other individuals die. That is, when a normal adult human being dies in the prime of life, this is a tragedy in a way in which it is not a tragedy when an ant (or rodent) dies. I wish to sketch some considerations by reference to which this intuitive difference might be explained.

The first strategy for explaining why the deaths of certain creatures are tragic claims that it is especially bad when any creature with the capacity to lead a meaningful life dies. The point is that only a proper subclass of sentient creatures have certain (notoriously difficult to specify) properties in virtue of which they have the capacity to lead a meaningful life; when such a creature dies, this blocks the possibility that it will lead a meaningful life, and thus the death of this sort of creature is especially bad. This strategy posits an interesting connection between death and the meaning of life.

But note that the connection is not as close as it might at first appear to be. There can be sentient creatures with the capacity to lead a meaningful life but which are not exercising that capacity; intuitively it might nevertheless be thought that the death of such a creature would be a tragedy. And the position under consideration here can accommodate this point. It is not required that the creature be exercising its capacity to lead a meaningful life, in order for its death to be a tragedy; rather, what is necessary is that it have the properties which ground a capacity to lead such a life.

What is of primary interest to us here then is the set of properties which ground the capacity to lead a meaningful life. It might be fruitful to think a bit about the structural features of lives we are inclined to consider meaningful, and then to ‘work back’ to a description of the set of properties which grounds the capacity to lead such a life. I think that leading a
meaningful life involves (at the minimum) freely constructing some sort of ‘life-plan’ and freely striving to act in accordance with it. It is in virtue of freely generating (in some sense) our plans of life – even extremely sketchy and inchoate plans, open to extensive subsequent specification and modification – that we give meaning to our lives. Individuals who cannot reason in ways required to make fairly simple plans lack the cognitive requirement for being able to lead meaningful lives. And individuals who are incapable of deliberating, choosing, and acting freely lack the volitional element minimally necessary for being able to lead a meaningful life.

In order freely to construct and strive to live in accordance with some sort of life-plan, certain minimal capacities are necessary: consciousness, some level of rationality, and free will of some kind. Only a conscious individual who can think (and has some suitable amount of memory) can construct a life-plan, and only a free agent can construct and evaluate (and re-evaluate) it freely and seek to act in accordance with it freely. Thus, these properties – consciousness, rationality, and free will – can help us to demarcate the boundary between the group of living creatures for whom death is a particularly egregious harm or evil, and the group of whom this is not true.

There is a fascinating albeit somewhat provisional and tentative presentation and evaluation of the sort of approach just sketched in Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974). Here Nozick points to and assesses some putative differences with regard to the capacity to lead a meaningful life between normal human beings and members of certain other species. For a recent discussion of such issues, see John Kleinig, *Valuing Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); see also Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (New York: Avon, 1975). Also, Nozick suggests that the relative stringency of ‘negative’ or ‘libertarian’ rights issues at least in part from their alleged importance in protecting the possibility of exercising the capacity to lead a meaningful life. For a critical discussion of this sort of claim, see Samuel Scheffler’s contribution to Jeffrey Paul, ed., *Reading Nozick* (Totowa: Rowman and Littlefield, 1981). Nozick extends and deepens his discussions of such issues as the meaning of life, the capacity to lead a meaningful life, and death in Nozick, 1981 and 1989.

Nozick’s ruminations in the later works highlight the point that the idea of freely constructing a life plan and freely striving to act in accordance with it are extraordinarily minimal features of a meaningful life. We also are inclined to think of other things as components of lives with some minimal level of meaningfulness: certain sorts of connections with descriptive reality and with values. That is to say, we value having knowledge of reality and responding appropriately to it. Nozick develops careful and detailed accounts of personal identity, knowledge, freedom, and the emotions at least in part in order to limn the putative contours of the connections he alleges we value as part of a meaningful life. In thinking about these issues it can be useful to distinguish: a minimally meaningful life, relative degrees of meaningfulness, the capacity to lead a meaningful life, the properties which ground the capacity to lead a meaningful life, the meaning of life (in general), and the meaning of a particular life.
We have seen, then, that one might specify a list of properties—consciousness, rationality, and free will—which apparently underlies the capacity to lead a minimally meaningful life. Even if a creature with such properties does not actually exercise his capacity or exercises it only minimally so that we would judge his life to be only minimally meaningful, these properties at least appear to be necessary conditions of leading a meaningful life. I wish now briefly to focus upon the property of free will. I wish to lay out some of the proposals for a sort of structure that must be in place if an individual is to possess the relevant sort of free will. These suggestions are particularly interesting insofar as they are related to other claims about the nature of the meaning of life (to be discussed below).

Harry Frankfurt has emphasised the connection between having a certain structure of the will and thus having the capacity for a certain sort of freedom, and being a person (and thus presumably having the capacity to lead a meaningful life). For essays developing these ideas, see Harry Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). For Frankfurt the structure which must be present in order for an individual to be free (and be a person) is hierarchical. That is, there are ‘first-order’ desires, which are desires to do (or refrain from doing) something, or desires that some state of affairs (apart from one’s own motivational states) obtain. Next, there are ‘second-order’ desires, which are desires about one’s first-order desires. So, for example, I may have a first-order desire to smoke a cigarette, and a first-order desire to remain healthy. Further, I may have a second-order desire to have the first-order desire to remain healthy. Finally, I may have a certain ‘second-order volition’: a second-order desire that my first-order desire to remain healthy (rather than my first-order desire for the cigarette) actually guide my behavior. Second-order volitions are second-order desires about which first-order desire should move one to action, i.e., be one’s ‘will’.

For Frankfurt, the specified structure helps to distinguish us from nonhuman animals in regard to personhood. Those creatures who lack second-order desires cannot act freely and thus cannot be persons—they cannot lead meaningful lives, insofar as freely constructing and striving to act in accordance with a plan of life is a constituent of a minimally meaningful life. Those creatures who have second-order desires but no second-order volitions are called ‘wantons’; Frankfurtconcedes that such individuals “stand at the margins of preciosity”, and he contends that they are not persons. (I have always found this claim of Frankfurt's somewhat puzzling. That is, why shouldn't the requirement for personhood be the capacity to have second-order volitions, rather than the actual possession of such volitions? Presumably, an individual could be open to criticism precisely for failing to form any second-order volitions.)

An alternative approach to the freedom component in the set of properties required to ground the capacity to lead a meaningful life has been suggested by Gary Watson. (See Watson's contribution to his anthology, *Free Agency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).) Watson’s approach, in contrast to Frankfurt’s, is not hierarchical; but it is similar to Frankfurt’s in that it posits...
the capacity for a certain sort of self-reflection. For Watson, what is required for freedom is the capacity to 'step back' from one's particular desires and to reflect upon and evaluate one's life as a whole; this reflection involves the capacity to adjust one's desires to fit into what the individual takes to be a minimally coherent, defensible whole life. Whereas Frankfurt posits different levels of desires, Watson posits different sources of desire (following Plato). Reason can be a source of desire insofar as a particular desire can issue from a certain sort of reflection upon one's life as a whole. For Frankfurt, acting freely consists in securing a conformity between one's second-order volition and the desire on which one acts; for Watson, acting freely consists in securing a conformity between what Reason dictates (the desires which reflect evaluations) and one's actual motivational states.

Whereas the theories of Frankfurt and Watson (and their followers) are different in various interesting ways, for our purposes it is convenient to point to a fundamental similarity: both approaches take as necessary to freedom a capacity to 'step back' or in some way 'detach' oneself from one's actual preferences and to critically evaluate them from some more 'objective' (in some sense) perspective. Of course, there are various ideas about what considerations are pertinent to such critical reflection and evaluation; but what is relevant here is simply the idea that the capacity for some sort of detached, critical evaluation is necessary for freedom (and thus for the capacity to lead a meaningful life).

I find it interesting that Thomas Nagel has identified something rather like this capacity for detached, critical evaluation as an essential ingredient in personhood. That is, a driving feature of Nagel’s work is the distinction between a relatively more 'situated', subjective perspective, and a relatively more detached, 'objective' perspective. For development of this distinction and its application to various philosophical problems, including the mind-body problem, the nature of personal identity, freedom, and morality, see Thomas Nagel 1979, 1986, and 1987.

Nagel shares the view of Frankfurt and Watson that it is an essential ingredient of persons that we are able to take up a perspective that is to some degree detached from and more expansive than our ordinary, more subjective perspective. An interesting point is that this very capacity — which in Frankfurt and Watson ground a necessary component of the set of properties required for the capacity to lead a meaningful life — tends to issue in doubts about the meaningfulness of our lives. According to Nagel, from the more objective perspective our own particular projects, commitments, enthusiasm, and 'strivings' can seem trivial and even absurd. That is, as we take up a more objective perspective, we tend to ask why our own subjectively important projects are not trivial and adventitious — the products of a defective and partial perspective. This can lead to feelings of alienation and depression — a sense of the absurdity and meaninglessness of our own lives. Thus, the very capacity that seems to make possible a meaningful life can seem to call it into question.

Nagel wishes to deny that the deliverances of the relatively more objective perspective should be thought to be decisive here. That is, Nagel emphasises
that the more subjective and the more objective perspectives are simply two different perspectives that individuals can adopt but which are not 'ordered' in the sense that one is more basic, fundamental, or important than another. They are indeed different and sometimes conflicting perspectives, but it cannot successfully be argued (according to Nagel) that the objective perspective invariably gives one a more accurate picture of reality. Nagel does however think that the sense of absurdity that issues from the conflict between the deliverances of the more subjective and more objective perspectives may well be an inevitable and ineradicable feature of our lives. It is interesting that it may be the case that the very feature that grounds our capacity to lead a meaningful life is an ineliminable element in generating questions about the meaningfulness of our lives. But I suppose it should not be surprising that there are intimate connections at a deep level between such notions as meaningfulness, absurdity, and even depression.


III. I shall only touch briefly on some of the recent work focussing on normative issues pertaining to death. I shall begin with more abstract ethical explorations which have a fairly tight connection to the conceptual and metaphysical issues raised above. Finally, I shall point to a small sample of recent work on particular ethical issues which involve death in a salient way.

Above I discussed (in a sketchy fashion) the puzzling issue of what precisely makes death a bad thing for an individual. Similarly, one might wonder what makes killing a bad thing—a moral wrong (other things equal). And just as the badness of death cannot be explained in terms of unpleasant experiences, so the wrongness of killing cannot be explained in terms of causing unpleasant experiences. Of course, this certainly is part of what makes many particular acts of killing wrong; but it is not essential to the wrongness of killing, since there are cases of unjustified killing which is painless.

According to Fred Feldman, the inability to explain precisely why killing is wrong is "one of the most notorious scandals of moral philosophy" (Feldman, 1992, p. 157). Feldman carefully criticises various alternative proposals, and then he defends a version of the view that killing another person is morally wrong (when it is wrong) because it makes the world 'worse' (in the relevant ways) than it would have been, but for the killing. He combines this view about the wrongness of killing with a version of the
deprivation theory of death's badness to get the result that such killings make the world worse primarily because they unjustly deprive their victims of goods they would have enjoyed, if they had not died when they actually did. For further discussions of the more abstract issues relevant to the question of why killing is morally wrong (when it is, all things considered, morally wrong), see: Philip E. Devine, *The Ethics of Homicide* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978); and Jeff McMahan, *The Ethics of Killing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

Finally, there is a voluminous literature on more specific ethical issues having to do with killing and letting die: euthanasia, suicide, capital punishment, and abortion. I shall mention only a small sample of the relevant literature here. I begin with three seminal articles which tie the more abstract considerations mentioned above with the more concrete ethical problems: Philippa Foot, 'Euthanasia', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. vi, 1977, pp. 85-112; Joel Feinberg, 'Voluntary Euthanasia and the Inalienable Right to Life', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. vii, 1978, pp. 93-123; and Warren Quinn, 'Abortion: Identity and Loss', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. xiii, 1984, pp. 3-23.


There are interesting discussions of the death penalty in Regan, ed., 1986; and Louis P. Pojman, *Life and Death: Grappling with the Moral Dilemmas of Our Time* (London: Jones and Bartlett, 1992).


Finally, there are insightful discussions of a very depressing current problem in: Christine Pierce and Donald VanDeVeer, *Aids: Ethics and Public Policy* (Belmont: Wadsworth, Inc., 1988).
I end with an apology: although the entire article is of necessity selective and incomplete, the final section on normative issues is especially brief. (A more complete account of this literature would be more appropriate to another essay.) Also, I have focussed on literature in the analytic tradition, due to my lack of expertise and knowledge of other literatures, in particular work by continental philosophers.

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MATERIAL BEINGS

1. There are no tables, chairs, rocks, or any other visible material objects except living organisms. This remarkable claim is the central thesis of Peter van Inwagen's excellent Material Beings (Cornell University Press, 1990, viii + 299 pp. $32.50). Van Inwagen does not expect to persuade all his readers to accept this conclusion, and not merely because of the problem of countering "the incredulous stares" (p. 1, quoting Lewis). For he is guided to it by a set of "metaphysical convictions" that constrain his theorising, not all of which are argued for in the text. Of these constraints (set out in the Preface) the most important, perhaps, are: opposition to conventionalism about ontology, a commitment to a 'classical' ('absolute') conception of identity, materialism about persons, and the rejection of a four-dimensionalist account of persisting things. However, although many of van Inwagen's metaphysical constraints are controversial, they do not appear implausible. It is therefore of great interest to determine whether they really do have the radical consequences for ontology that he draws from them, and what our reaction should be if they do. In addition, van Inwagen's book contains much that is of value quite independently of his metaphysical framework. This includes his interesting and original discussions of puzzles about the identities of persons and other living things ($§$ 14-16), the relation between metaphysics and ordinary language ($§§$ 10-11), the logic of the part-whole relation ($§§$ 2, 4, 5), and the possibility of vague objects ($§§$ 17-19).

2. Van Inwagen's denial that there are tables, rocks, etc. (which he calls "The Denial") is based on the fact that if they were to exist, they would be composite material objects. He argues at length that no satisfactory account of composition will allow an inanimate material thing to be composed of other material things. Taking physics to have shown that if there are any simple material things they are subatomic particles (p. 99, for example), he concludes that there are no inanimate material objects above the subatomic level. The idioms of ordinary language may suggest that the arrangement of material simples in a region of space sometimes generates an inanimate 'thing' that the simples compose — for example, an atom, a crystal, a pebble, a star, a chair, a statue. However, according to van Inwagen, we should not allow these idioms to lure us into a false metaphysics. The only way in which material things can genuinely compose something — and hence the only way in which material unity can "arise out of [material] plurality"