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## **Dying to Live Longer**

An analysis and evaluation of Lucretius' arguments against the fear of death and  
Bernard Williams' arguments against the desire for immortality

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### Abstract

In this paper I explore human attitudes towards death, especially our fear of it, and the subsequent question that it raises - should humans desire immortality? I aim to show that although Lucretius' raises logical arguments against the fear of death, there exist several emotional, pragmatic and rational critiques. Furthermore, I also show that Bernard Williams is correct in stating that the desire for immortality is irrational, in that it leads to perpetual boredom.

The paper centers on Lucretius' *On the Nature of Things* and Bernard Williams' *Problems of Self*. I draw upon various papers and books by philosophers such as Martha Nussbaum, Thomas Nagel and Donald Bruckner to both support and refute Lucretius and Williams' arguments. Additionally theories from social psychology and Thomas Hobbes were also used.

Lucretius' main argument for why one should not rationally fear death is that one should not fear what cannot be experienced. However, Thomas Nagel's critiques demonstrate cases where we have a basis to rationally fear what we cannot experience, such as when they deny otherwise achievable possibilities. After concluding that we have reasons to fear death, the second half of the paper looks at whether immortality can be desirable. If immortal, all our desires would eventually be fulfilled making life meaningless and boring, as suggested by Bernard Williams. Donald Bruckner aims to disprove this by demonstrating that desires can be repeated without the associated feelings of boredom, however he either disregards the definition of immortality or does not properly take into account the infinitude of immortality. Hence, although we may fear death, we can never rationally desire immortality.

(266 words)

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## Introduction

Death is a phenomenon that affects everyone - there is no escape. Hence, it is important for us, as philosophers, to aim to understand the nature of death and human attitudes towards it. This paper will focus on the latter and explore two central questions: Is death something we should fear? And consequently, can we rationally desire immortality? Rationally requires that the desire is not emotionally motivated, and fulfilling it would be beneficial.

This paper will answer the first question by exploring ancient Greek philosopher Lucretius' arguments, which aim to prove that we should not fear death, as well as Thomas Nagel's critiques of those arguments. To answer the second question, we will examine Bernard Williams' ideas on the tediousness of immortality and possible objections. This paper will show that although it may be considered irrational to fear death, as emotional beings, it is still a reasonable fear for humans. Yet, immortality will result in perpetual boredom due to the finite nature of human desires and thus is not desirable.

For the purposes of this paper, we assume the premise that death is the absolute end and there is no soul that continues after death. There is no afterlife or rebirth, no life after death; no part of us transcends death. This assumption is critical for a proper understanding of Lucretius' arguments. Although Lucretius provided some justification for this premise<sup>1</sup>, that is a subject for an altogether different paper. Hence, I define immortality as a continuous life without death, where the same body, mind and all other aspects of the person in question continue seamlessly forever.

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<sup>1</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, "Mortal Immortals: Lucretius on Death and the Voice of Nature," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 50, no. 2 (1989), doi:10.2307/2107963, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2107963>, 313.

## **“Death is Nothing to Us” – Lucretius and the Fear of Death**

Humans instinctively fear death. Natural selection has, after all, imbued within us the will to survive, not only to pass on our genes. An infertile person or animal does not lie down and die; it also strives to live. Survival and rejection of death is a natural instinct, buried deep within our human nature as a primal desire. The problem arises when we realize that as humans with higher cognitive functions, we are able to comprehend the finitude of our existence and the inevitability of death. This realization is what instills the fear of death in us, for we know it is coming and will rid us of our own life, something we instinctively want to preserve.<sup>2</sup>

Lucretius, as an Epicurean, strived to remove false beliefs that would impede a happy life, for a happy life is the greatest good from a Hedonistic and Epicurean standpoint.<sup>3</sup> Hence, in his poems he attempts to show why death is not something to be feared. He first comments on the inner symptoms of this fear, pointing out that no activity or action can ever take away the prospect or inevitability of death, and so we can never be truly satisfied in any activity as long as we are afraid of and dwell on death. In some cases this can cause people to transition from a hatred of death to a hatred of life. Lucretius states, “And often, on account of the fear of death, such a hatred of life and of seeing the light seizes human beings that, in their state of agony, they commit suicide.”<sup>4</sup> Next he talks about outer symptoms, and how humans become greedy and lust for power or honor, as the amassing of desirable worldly possessions can make one *feel*

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<sup>2</sup> Van Lange and Paul A. M., *Handbook of Theories of Social Psychology*, ed. Arie W. Kruglanski, Tory E. Higgins, and Paul A. M. van Lange (United Kingdom: SAGE Publications, 2011), 398.

<sup>3</sup> “Epicurus,” April 20, 2014, accessed August 23, 2016, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/epicurus/>.

<sup>4</sup> Titus Lucretius Carus, *On the Nature of Things*, trans. W. E. Leonard (n.p.: Project Gutenberg, 2012), [https://www.gutenberg.org/files/785/785-h/785-h.htm#link2H\\_4\\_0013](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/785/785-h/785-h.htm#link2H_4_0013), Book 3.

further from death or as though their reputation will outlast their death and live on as them.<sup>5</sup> It is obvious from the above symptoms that we desire to do more with our life, be it by leaving a legacy (external means) or deeply satisfying ourselves (internal means). These symptoms also show that our fear of death is equivalent to “our fear of leaving life and its good things.”<sup>6</sup>

With this in mind, we can now move onto Lucretius’ arguments explaining why we should not fear death. His first argument is as follows:

Premise 1 - any event, X, can only be good or bad for us if, at the time of the event, we exist as a subject of possible experiences and can experience event X and its aftermath. Premise 2 - Once we are dead, we are not a subject of experiences and thus cannot experience any events since we are no longer in the world. Hence it follows that being dead is not bad for a person, since they cannot experience any subsequent events. Lastly, it is irrational to fear that which is not bad, so we should not fear being dead or losing life since we will not experience this loss.<sup>7</sup> The second premise is assumed to be true for the purpose of this paper as mentioned in the introduction, and the first premise is proposed as intuitive.

Lucretius also proposes other arguments to strengthen his claim that the fear of death is irrational. The symmetry argument asks us to consider the time before we were born; our prenatal non-existence is essentially the same as our non-existence after death, a time when we do not exist. At this time we felt no pain, or suffering, or anything ill at all. Since we did not exist, it does not make sense to consider our state of being. Furthermore, after experiencing things as a

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<sup>5</sup> Titus Lucretius Carus, *On the Nature of Things*, Book 3.

<sup>6</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, *Mortal Immortals: Lucretius on Death and the Voice of Nature*, 310.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 312.

subject and living, our prenatal non-existence is unthought of. We have no real qualms or distress at the thought of the time before we were born, or that we lost some quantity of life by not being born earlier. Since prenatal non-existence is similar, if not the same, to post death non-existence, our judgment and attitudes toward them should be similar as well. Not only will we not feel any pain or suffering after our death, but we should also not concern ourselves of our death and our time after dying since we do not concern ourselves with the time before we were born.<sup>8</sup>

Lastly, Lucretius aims to prove that it does not matter when we die and that an early death is not worse than a late death. At first glance this seems perplexing, given a choice we would all love to live for as long as possible. But Lucretius states that there is no finite period of death, it matters not if you die early or late as you will spend the same amount of time dead. "Therefore one might as well die earlier."<sup>9</sup> A young man who is about to die and an old man about to die share the exact same fate, there is no difference in the death they face and neither should be afraid of it, so it matters not when we die. Furthermore, no matter how old we are we will always fear death, but due to Lucretius' previous arguments we never should. So although living longer is more desirable, it does not mean we should fear an early death. From these three arguments, "we can conclude nil igitur mors est ad nos, neque pertinet hilum – death is nothing to us, and does not matter at all."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> James Warren, "Lucretius, Symmetry Arguments, and Fearing Death," *Phronesis* 46, no. 4 (2001), accessed August 23, 2016, doi:10.1163/156852801753736508, [http://www.faculty.umb.edu/adam\\_beresford/courses/phil\\_381\\_08/1\\_lucretius\\_death.pdf](http://www.faculty.umb.edu/adam_beresford/courses/phil_381_08/1_lucretius_death.pdf), 468.

<sup>9</sup> Bernard Williams, *Problems of the Self: Philosophical Papers 1956-1972* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 84.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

Lucretius' arguments are all valid in that the logic flows smoothly and coherently, yet are they really successful in assuaging the human fear of death? The first argument, which proposes that we should not fear that which we cannot experience, does not address the emotional fear of death. Just rationally knowing that something is not going to be unpleasant or painful, does not address a deeply rooted emotional fear of it. For example, imagine a new type of needle that has just been invented, it looks far more menacing and painful than conventional needles but all doctors and patients agree that it is completely painless. If it were ones first time getting an injection from it, would one be scared? Most people certainly would, and this points to how pure reason and logic cannot completely overthrow deeply entrenched emotional perceptions of events since humans are not completely rational, logical beings. This is similar to philosopher Thomas Hobbes' views on how human nature causes us to intrinsically fear death, "The fundamental desire of the human animal is the unlimited desire for self-preservation."<sup>11</sup> The symmetry argument seems flimsy as it is centered on the belief that prenatal non-existence is similar to post death non-existence. This belief does not hold up when we consider our attitudes on death and prenatal non-existence. Only after being born do we know what it is like to be alive, which is something we then do not want to lose. Again although the logic is valid, the argument is not very pragmatic because of our deeply entrenched attitudes on prenatal and post death non-existence.

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<sup>11</sup> Peter J. Ahrens Dorf, "The Fear of Death and the Longing for Immortality: Hobbes and Thucydides on Human Nature and the Problem of Anarchy," *The American Political Science Review* 94, no. 3 (2000), doi:10.2307/2585832, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2585832>, 581.



## Nagel's Critiques of Lucretius

While Lucretius offers many arguments as to why death should not be feared, many of the arguments can be said to rest on shaky premises. Let us start by analyzing the first premise of the first argument presented above, which was said to be intuitively true. The first premise can essentially be reduced to the general statement that what we do not know cannot hurt us, and what we cannot experience cannot be bad for us. However Thomas Nagel points out that Lucretius has taken all events to be suspended in time, irrespective of past events and possible future events. Lucretius only considers the static or time irrespective type of goods and evils and held that all good and evil were of that kind, since the pain or pleasure they bring us can be attributed to our state when we discover or experience it. Nagel goes on to comment that in actuality the effects of most good and evil, most events is dependent on past events and hence associated with time and context. Take the simple act of eating a slice of plain bread. This would be good for an impoverished person but regarded as an evil for a rich person who is accustomed to luxury. Even possible futures would impact how the bread is viewed - if the rich person was aware that his fortune was at risk and may be lost soon he might view the bread as less of an evil, since it may become his norm. Hence the history of a person experiencing an event is important to know in order to determine its consequences on said person, especially in cases involving deterioration, deprivation or damage.<sup>12</sup>

Nagel holds that “most good and ill fortune has as its subject a person identified by his history and his possibilities, rather than merely by his

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<sup>12</sup> Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 5-7.

categorical state of the moment.”<sup>13</sup> Good and harm can indeed befall a person even if he is not aware of it. A case of this is that of an adult who is a victim of severe brain trauma and loses his higher cognitive functions, but continues to live as a happy child.<sup>14</sup> Such a being in this current mental state would not be aware of the accident and trauma that has befallen him, so according to Lucretius he should not consider it an evil. But this clearly seems wrong; the person was in fact a victim of great evil as it is a great loss for the intelligent adult that no longer exists, and the adult who has replaced him has been denied a great many opportunities. This example clearly illustrates how we can suffer great losses without knowing of them befalling us and why Nagel’s definition of how events should be valued is better since it acknowledges more context than Lucretius’ simplistic stance. Death is harm and can affect us even if we do not experience it, “because it deprives the agent who was of the fulfillment of all his possibilities.”<sup>15</sup>

Nagel’s approach also points towards a refutation to the symmetry argument by helping us differentiate how prenatal non-being is different from non-being after death. Although we are deprived of life by both versions of non-being, but the type of life we are deprived of varies. The movement of time is unidirectional, it only moves forwards, hence when someone dies they have lost the chance to live through possible experiences that could have been theirs. However a person could not have been born much earlier and still have been the same person. It is possible for the life of an individual from one beginning to diverge into multiple endings, yet the converse, life from multiple beginnings converging into one ending, is not. Life from multiple beginnings would not all be

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<sup>13</sup> Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 6.

<sup>14</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, *Mortal Immortals: Lucretius on Death and the Voice of Nature*, 315

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

the same even if they ended in the same fashion; they are not different possibilities for one life but rather multiple different lives. Hence by being born earlier a person will lead a completely different life, and thus be a completely different person. So while death deprives our life of further possibilities, coming into existence earlier does not.<sup>16</sup>

Nagel concedes that his critique encounters some problems. The most striking is that regarding what is meant by *possibilities*. Martha C. Nussbaum states “it is left rather unclear how these are to be located, and how we go about determining just what possibilities death has actually frustrated.”<sup>17</sup> How many possibilities are left for us in the future? How long should we exist in order to fulfill all these possibilities? Additionally, and more importantly, Nagel never states how an event that takes place completely outside of one’s life, whose repercussions in terms of pain and pleasure do not affect the person while he/she is alive, could diminish the life itself and counter Lucretius’ first premise. Nagel only explores cases where the person that endures through a bad event is at the very least somewhat similar to the person who actually experiences the bad event. The adult who loses his higher cognitive functions above is a continuation of himself from before and physically similar. Yet after death, if we are greeted by non-being, then we are in no way similar to our self before death.

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Although Nagel’s arguments are not completely sound, they do raise problems with Lucretius’ original arguments, especially the symmetry argument

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<sup>16</sup> Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions*, 9.

<sup>17</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, *Mortal Immortals: Lucretius on Death and the Voice of Nature*, 315

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 316.

by making clear the distinction between prenatal and post death non-existence. Furthermore the emotional and pragmatic considerations of death have not been addressed by Lucretius' hyper rational arguments. Therefore we do not need to accept Lucretius' conclusion - that we cannot rationally fear death. The tension between our innate desire to survive and awareness of our mortality manifest in an almost natural fear of death, hence we can justifiably fear death.

### **Bernard Williams On Immortality**

Lucretius argued that it does not matter when one dies, so a younger death is no worse than an older death. However, if we accept Nagel's criticisms of Lucretius' arguments, we would also have to concede that it is always better to live longer. Hence the question is raised that perhaps the greatest life is that which never ends, for this is the longest life. Bernard Williams states, "If Lucretius is wrong, we seem committed to wanting to be immortal."<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, there also exists a strong emotional reason to desire immortality, since as natural beings crafted through evolution it is part of our instincts to keep on surviving, living. We all age and die, but if there were ever the technology allowed us to indefinitely extend our lifespan, should we do so? Should we want to become immortal?

Bernard Williams first considers a play called the *Makropulos Affair*, a Czech opera by Leoš Janáček, in which a woman named Elina Makropulos has a pill that allows her to not age, as long as she keeps taking it. In the play, Elina eventually kills herself at the age of 342, due to her restlessness with the monotony of life. Williams uses this play as an example of the tedium of

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<sup>19</sup> Bernard Williams, *Problems of the Self: Philosophical Papers 1956-1972*, 89.

immortality and forms his arguments around it. He defines immortality as an infinite extension of our current life where we gain no powers or invulnerability of any kind. This description is based on two premises, “that it should clearly be *me* who lives forever,” that is my character should stay fixed, and to be in such a state of being that I can fulfill any goals or desires I may have in surviving.<sup>20</sup>

For Williams, life is rewarding and valuable due to the existence of goals and desires we have, which are exhaustible. Hence, once we have accomplished every goal or desire we originally had, life would become incredibly tedious. These desires include our “categorical desires”<sup>21</sup> that constitute our long term goals and character; the desires, such as to write a novel or run a successful company, that form the backbone of our lives and encourage us to continue to keep living. Furthermore, Williams believes that all our desires are self-exhausting rather than repeatable, that is constantly repeating the pursuit of a goal or desire, eventually, will not actually be fulfilling or worthwhile anymore. This is because the utility we receive from completing a desire decreases each time we complete that desire. We already have the memory of originally completing the desire and the joy it gave us, so the joy we receive from completing it again will be less because it was not novel and we already have an expectation or foreknowledge of how we will feel. Once all our desires had been fulfilled to their complete extent, boredom would become a perpetual state, as every experience we had henceforth would be one we had already encountered and not bring us any meaningful pleasure or joy.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Bernard Williams, *Problems of the Self: Philosophical Papers 1956-1972*, 91.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 87-89.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 89.

## Donald Bruckner's Critiques

Donald Bruckner in "Against the Tedium of Immortality" reflects on human nature in an effort to point out what he believes to be flaws in Williams' arguments. He acknowledges some features in humans, which he believes will help us overcome the so-called tedium of immortality. Firstly, "human ingenuity" allows that humans would develop and adapt into a different, more advanced society over time, which would allow for new, interesting ideas and projects to be explored, and in turn create more questions and so forth; a self-generating cycle of ideas and experiences. These experiences would constantly add to our categorical desires, and hence we would never run out of ideas and fall into boredom.<sup>23</sup> Additionally we are also prone to "memory decay" - we do not have a perfect recollection of past events and hence repeating an event may not be tedious if we have forgotten what it was like. This ties into a third trait of humans, "desire rejuvenation" or the notion that even if our memories of doing an event did not decay, our recollection of the feeling associated with the event would be far inferior to the feeling gained by repeating the event.<sup>24</sup> Bruckner aims to show that categorical desires are in fact repeatable in nature because we forget parts of the experience of accomplishing them. Although immediately repeating an activity could be boring because of the fresh recollection, given enough time, recollections fade and hence the same activity can become enjoyable and worthwhile again.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Donald W. Bruckner, "Against the Tedium of Immortality," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 20, no. 5 (December 1, 2012), doi:10.1080/09672559.2012.713383, 623-644.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

However Bruckner's arguments are not free of critiques. The first one clashes with Williams' conditions for immortality. The first condition maintained that it must be *me* living the immortal life, and *me* is defined by way of categorical desires one would possess. Creating new categorical desires would create new lives or selves, because each life exists as a state in which to fulfill some categorical desire. There would be no clear sense of the original self that would persist through time and an infinite life. The second argument states that the immortal being would forget parts of his experiences over time, but he would always remember at least some residual details of his previous experience. If repeated till infinity, no matter the time gap between subsequent experiences, every time slightly more of the experience would be remembered due to repetition solidifying memory. Therefore eventually one would remember enough past repetitions of a certain experience that the experience would cease to be novel. Hence memory decay is not a solution to the boredom. Similarly the third argument of desire rejuvenation is also flawed in that it does not take into account the fact that repeating an event strengthens the feelings associated with that event. After an event has been repeated enough times, the recollection of feelings associated with it will be equally strong to the feelings one would get by doing said event. Hence repeating it again would also lead to the systematic boredom described by Bernard Williams.

The only way to not have to contend with this boredom is if one could somehow erase memories and start over new, on a clean slate. However this also clashes with Williams' conditions for immortality in that you would not be you anymore, you would be someone else living a different life. What if our immortal

being started over a clean slate but with the same categorical desires? This way he could experience events and desires over and over again without boredom because he would completely lose all memories from the past. Yet this does not fully fulfill Williams' criteria for immortality since even though you would have the same desires, there would be no sense of continuation in your life due to the numerous memory resets. Hence could one really say it is you who is continuing to live?

The key point that these critiques and Williams' responses bring up is that immortality can only be meaningful if we are to live forever but start our lives over every now and then with new goals and desires. That is, we would require a reboot of some kind, to forget our past life and transition into a new life.

Immortality is worthwhile if and only if we live it not as one life, but as a never-ending series of lives.<sup>26</sup> Immortality as an infinite extension of our lives is not desirable because our sense of self is linked to our categorical desires and aims for life, which can be completed within a finite period of time and would hence leave us in a state of perpetual boredom upon their completion.

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<sup>26</sup> Bernard Williams, *Problems of the Self: Philosophical Papers 1956-1972*, 94.



## Conclusion

It seems clear that although we may fear death, for it is our natural instinct to desire life; immortality is not something we should desire. Lucretius aimed to rationally disprove this fear of death by claiming that we would not be around to feel the loss, hence we should not fear the loss. However Nagel's critiques demonstrated that arguments of this form are not always true, due to the fact that we cannot take events as affecting people at isolated points, but need to consider them in the context of one's life. So death is a great loss to us because it takes away the opportunities we would have otherwise had. Following this it stood that Lucretius' arguments, while impactful, were not sound enough to urge us to overcome our natural instincts and not fear death. It is after all a human instinct to at least have the opportunity to accomplish our best and flourish, something death deprives us of. However if we wished to maintain our character and ourselves, we still should not aim for immortality because it would always lead to overwhelming boredom.

Further investigation could be conducted to see if perhaps immortality as a state of infinite new lives, each with different categorical desires, would be meaningful and worthwhile. Additionally the fact that categorical desires exist and cannot be replenished without changing ones self, raises interesting questions about the essential self. Does this mean that the essential self, the part of our self that is always constant, is an illusion or non-existent since if our desires change, our self changes as well?

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