is there life after death? would immortality
be a good thing?

Our topic today is one on which we've already touched several times this semester: this is the topic of the possibility of life after death.

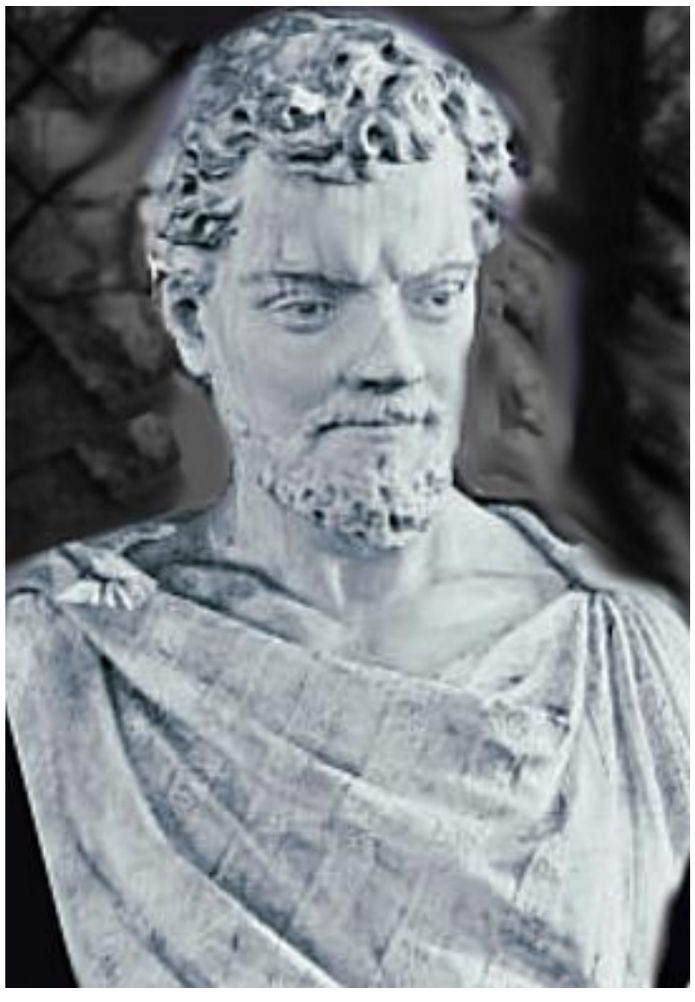
Today we will discuss three different philosophical questions about death, and life after death:

If there is no life after death, is death a bad thing?

Is there life after death?

If life after death is possible, is it desirable?

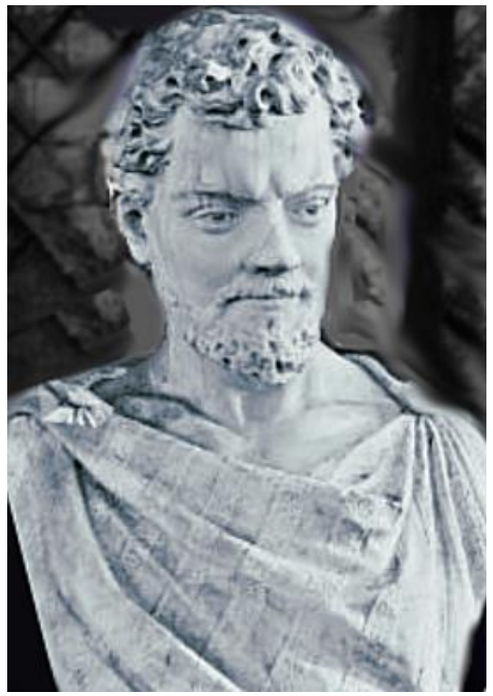
If there is no life after death, is death a bad thing?



One reason for interest in the question of whether life after death is possible is the thought that, if there is no life after death, then death would be a terrible thing.

But there is an ancient tradition which says that this is a mistake: that death, even if there is no life after death, is nothing to be feared. (Note that we should distinguish the fear of death from the fear of dying — no one disputes that dying painfully can be a bad thing.)

Lucretius, a Roman philosopher who lived in the first century B.C., was part of this tradition. In his poem *De Rerum Natura* (*On the Nature of Things*), he gave two short and intriguing arguments against the idea that death is at all a bad thing.



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Here is the first:

> If it happens that people are to suffer unhappiness and pain in the future, they themselves must exist at that future time for harm to be able to befall them; and since death takes away this possibility by preventing the existence of those who might have been visited by troubles, you may be sure that there is nothing to fear in death, that those who no longer exist cannot become miserable, and that it makes not one speck of difference whether or not they have ever been born once their mortal life has been snatched away by deathless death.

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Lucretius' idea is that after death we will not exist. But if we will not exist, it is impossible for us to be harmed in any way; and if this is right, there is nothing to fear from death.

In slogan form: 'If death is there, we are not, and if we are there, death is not.' So we have nothing to fear from death.

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Here is one way in which Lucretius' argument can be represented:

1. The only things I should fear are experiences which I undergo.
2. When I am dead, I undergo no experiences.

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C. I should not fear death. (1,2)

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Of course, one might dispute the second premise — but here we are assuming for the sake of argument that there is no life after death. Is the first premise plausible?

Here is a natural response to the first premise: 'Yes, it is true that I will have no experiences after I die. But just that fact is part of what makes death so horrible. What is bad about death is that after death I will not exist — and my non-existence is the worst thing that can happen to me.'

Those who fear death because they fear the end of their existence are unlikely to be consoled by Lucretius' first argument.

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> "Look back at time ... before our birth. In this way Nature holds before our eyes the mirror of our future after death. Is this so grim, so gloomy?"

Here Lucretius points out that we are already familiar with times at which we do not exist: namely, all of those times before our birth. When you think about times before your birth, are you filled with horror? Lucretius thinks not. But then you should not fear times after your death, because those will be just the same.

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A natural reply is to say: ‘OK, I agree that there is nothing especially fearsome about my past nonexistence. But future nonexistence is different; I should fear my future nonexistence even if I do not fear my past nonexistence.’

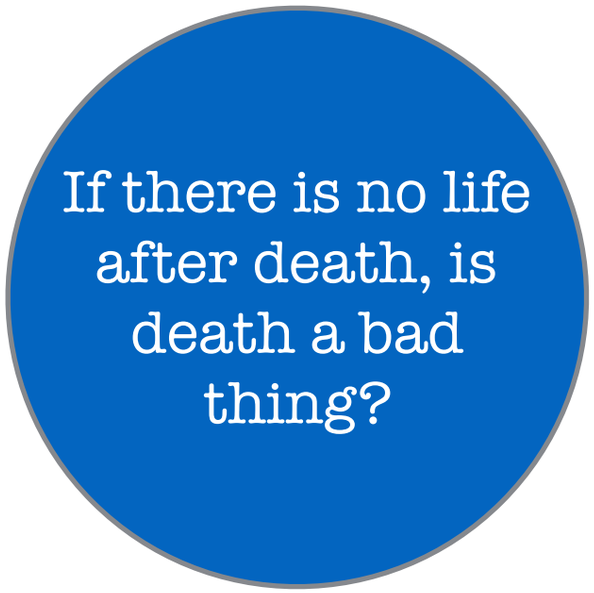
Most of us have a negative feeling about future nonexistence which we do not have about past nonexistence. Lucretius’ challenge is to justify this difference in our attitudes. Why shouldn’t we feel about post-death nonexistence the same way we feel about pre-birth nonexistence?

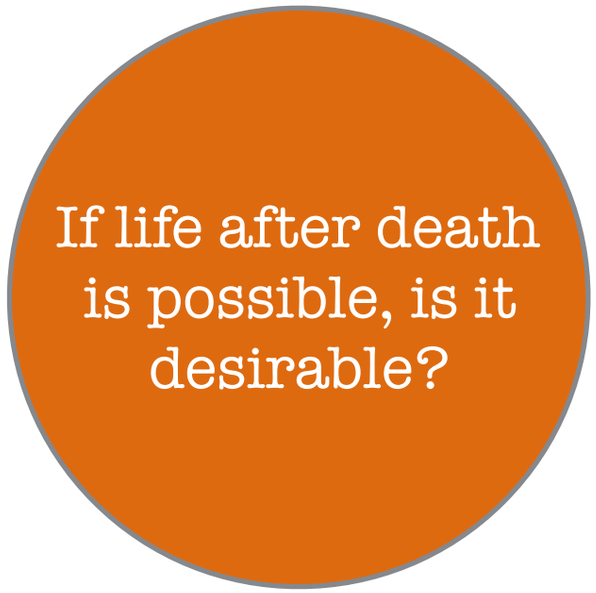
A natural reply is to say: 'OK, I agree that there is nothing especially fearsome about my past nonexistence. But future nonexistence is different; I should fear my future nonexistence even if I do not fear my past nonexistence.'

But then Lucretius might ask: why is this? Why would it be rational to have very different attitudes toward two equivalent states of affairs just because they happen to occupy different locations in time? We don't, after all, make parallel distinctions between events occurring in different locations in space.

The fact is that people do systematically exhibit time bias: they prefer good things to be in their future and bad things in their past. The interesting question raised by the symmetry argument is whether this feature of human thinking is a rational one, or one we should attempt to overcome. If the latter is correct, then the symmetry argument has considerable force.

It is worth flagging one commitment of the attempt to respond to the symmetry argument via a defense of time bias: it appears to require a real distinction between past and future. As we'll see when we turn out attention to time and the possibility of time travel, this is not a trivial thing.





When we were discussing the nature of persons, we discussed the question of whether life after death is possible. Life after death seems pretty clearly possible on dualist or psychological views; matters are trickier if materialism about persons is true, but even here there is room to believe in the possibility of life after death.

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There are a number of arguments for and against life after death that I'll mention only briefly and then set aside.

The first is what might be called the argument from religion. There are as many versions of this argument as there are religions; here is one

1. Christianity is true.
2. If Christianity is true, there is life after death.

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C. There is life after death.

I'm not setting aside this kind of argument because it is bad. Rather, I am setting it aside because a discussion of the first premise would take us too far afield. We have already discussed arguments relevant to it — the arguments for God's existence, and the argument from evil.

The second argument I am going to mention and then set aside is the argument from near death experiences.

Many people who come very close to death report similar kinds of experiences — a feeling of looking down at one's body, of feeling disembodied, of moving towards a light. One might argue from these experiences as follows:

1. People have near death experiences.
2. If there were no life after death, people would not have near death experiences..

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C. There is life after death.

It is worth noting that this is an argument for life after death, but cannot in any obvious way (unlike the argument from religion) be turned into an argument for immortality.

The key premise here is obviously the second one. A serious assessment of it would have to look at the details of the kinds of near death experiences people report, and consideration of the possible explanations of these experiences.

The last argument I am going to mention and set aside is what might be called the argument from technological immortality.

According to this argument, we or our descendants will achieve something close to immortality, not by surviving death, but by indefinitely delaying it. Perhaps, for example, we could 'upload' ourselves to a kind of virtual world.

I set this one aside for two reasons. First, it is not really about life after death at all. Second, we'll discuss this kind of possibility more next class.

I am going to look at two philosophical arguments on this topic — one for the existence of life after death, and the other against it.

The first argument has its origins in Plato's *Phaedo*. This is a dialogue which takes place between Socrates and his friends, after Socrates has been sentenced to death for corrupting the youth of Athens.

Socrates is unworried, explaining to his friends that death is nothing to be afraid of; death is just the death of the body, and not the death of him.

He gives a few arguments in favor of this view; the most influential is contained in the following passage:

> 'We ought, I think,' said Socrates, 'to ask ourselves this: What sort of thing is it that would naturally suffer the fate of being dispersed? For what sort of thing should we fear this fate, and for what should we not? When we have answered this, we should next consider to which class the soul belongs; and then we shall know whether to feel confidence or fear about the fate of our souls.'
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> 'Quite true.'
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> 'Would you not expect a composite object or a natural compound to be liable to break up where it was put together? and ought not anything which is really incomposite to be the one thing of all others which is not affected in this way?'

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Socrates begins by asking what sorts of things can be 'dispersed.' He considers two categories of things: composite things, which have parts, and incomposite things, which are simple and have no parts.

It seems clear that composite things can be dispersed, whereas simple things cannot. Being dispersed, after all, is just a matter of having your parts taken out of connection with each other, and simple things have no parts.

But, one might think, this shows that only composite things can be destroyed; for how can you destroy something other than by breaking it up into its parts?

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The key question, then, is: are we composite, or simple?

Plato was, like Descartes, a dualist — he held that we are immaterial souls. If we assume this dualist view, then the question is whether immaterial souls are composite or simple.

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We can then give the following argument from the simplicity of the soul:

1. Persons are immaterial souls.
2. All immaterial things are simple.
3. Only composite things can be destroyed.
4. Immaterial souls cannot be destroyed. (2,3)

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C. Persons cannot be destroyed. (1,4)

We've already considered defenses of the first premise. Obviously, materialists and psychological theorists who reject those defenses are unlikely to be persuaded by this argument. But should dualists be convinced by it?

One might question either premise (2) or premise (3).

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One might question either premise (2) or premise (3).

Hume gives an interesting reply to this argument:

> what is incorruptible must also be ingenerable. The soul, therefore, if immortal, existed before our birth: And if the former existence nowise concerned us, neither will the latter.

This begins with the plausible thought that if something cannot be destroyed then it also cannot be created. So, if we are things that cannot be destroyed, then we are also things that cannot be created. So, just as (according to this argument) we will exist after our death, so we must have existed before our birth.

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This poses a dilemma for the defender of the simplicity argument.

On the one hand, she can deny that we preexisted our births. But then she needs to explain why the argument for life after death is stronger than the argument for preexistence.

On the other hand, she can accept preexistence. (This was Plato's view.) But how good was your life before you were born? If life after death is just like the 'life' you had before you were born, then it does not seem to be a kind of life after death worth wanting.

Hume did not think that there were any good philosophical arguments for life after death. He thought that the only good argument in the vicinity counts against life after death, not for it.

Here's the key passage:

Where any two objects are so closely connected, that all alterations, which we have ever seen in the one, are attended with proportionable alterations in the other: we ought to conclude, by all rules of analogy, that, when there are still greater alterations produced in the former, and it is totally dissolved, there follows a total dissolution of the latter.

Sleep, a very small effect on the body, is attended with a temporary extinction: at least, a great confusion in the soul.

The weakness of the body and that of the mind in infancy are exactly proportioned; their vigour in manhood, their sympathetic disorder in sickness, their common gradual decay in old age. The step further seems unavoidable; their common dissolution in death.

How would you state Hume's argument?

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1. Observations of damage to the body are always accompanied by observations of damage to the mind.
2. If every observation of a thing changing in one way is accompanied by an observation of the thing changing in another way, then we should think that even greater changes of the first kind will be accompanied by proportionally greater changes of the second kind.
3. Great damage to the body will be accompanied by proportionally great damage to the mind. (1,2)
4. Death destroys the body.

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C. Death destroys the mind. (3,4)

One might quibble with the first premise; but presumably it could be fixed up to focus on specific kinds of damage to the body.

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Reasoning of the kind Hume advocates here can lead one astray. Here's an example. Suppose that we observe a bunch of liquids, and note that cooling them always makes them more dense. Using Hume's reasoning, one could then conclude that cooling water to its freezing point would make it even more dense. But it doesn't — ice is less dense than water.

I don't think that Hume would object to this point. I think that he would accept that the general principle stated in premise (2) has exceptions.

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I think that what Hume would say is that this is a reasonable principle to endorse in a given domain unless we have special reason to think that the generalization fails.

In the case of water and ice there is such a special reason, involving differences between the bonds between water molecules in water and in ice. Hume would then ask whether there is any such special reason in the case of death.

In that sense you might take Hume's argument to be a claim about what should guide our thinking about death in the absence of any positive arguments for life after death — for these arguments would be, in effect, special reasons to think that the relationship between mind and body is different in the case of death than throughout one's life.

Let’s now turn to the third of our three questions.

If there is no life after death, is death a bad thing?

Is there life after death?

If life after death is possible, is it desirable?

If life after death is possible, is it desirable?

I think that it is fair to say that most people would respond to this question with a resounding 'Yes.' And many would say something stronger: it is desirable that we live forever, and that we never go out of existence.

This is the view that Williams aims to call into question with his discussion of EM, the subject of a play (and opera) called *The Makropulos Case*.

EM takes elixir which, if taken consistently, enables her to live forever and, at the age of 342, decides to end her life by not taking the elixir any more. Williams wants to argue two things. First, that EM's decision makes sense; and, second, that no sort of eternal life would be worth wanting.

Why does EM want to kill herself? Williams thinks that, if one lives long enough, things must go one of two ways. His central argument is a kind of dilemma.

On the one hand, one might live with a relatively fixed character and personality:

> Her problem lay in having been at it for too long. Her trouble was it seems, boredom: a boredom connected with the fact that everything that could happen and make sense to one particular human being of 42 had already happened to her. Or, rather, all the sorts of things that could make sense to one woman of a certain character; for EM has a certain character, and indeed, except for her accumulating memories of earlier times, and no doubt some changes of style to suit the passing centuries, seems always to have been much the same sort of person.

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Consider first an extremely boring immortal existence, in which one just sits in a room with nothing to do. Would you eventually wish for your life to be over?

Williams' thought is that even if were introduce some variety, if one makes life long enough, it will eventually be effectively like the "sitting in a room" existence — you will have experienced everything there is to experience.

So let's consider the other horn of the dilemma, and imagine that one's character might be constantly changing, so that one has widely different desires at different times. This might seem to avoid the problem of boredom; as soon as I get bored, I could just become a different kind of person.

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But then, Williams asks, why should I wish for that kind of life? Why should I wish to continue to exist if, eventually, I will not be motivated by any of the desires which currently motivate me?

It is a bit odd to be told that I will exist 100,000 years from now — but that the person who I will then be has nothing psychologically in common with the person I am now.

My life, at that point, might begin to seem unacceptably random. Part of what gives our lives meaning now is that they have a certain kind of unity — there are relationships, and projects, which span the various parts of our lives. If that were removed life might begin to seem pointless.

That is Williams' dilemma — on the one hand, boredom, and on the other, a kind of pointless random variation. Either way, he thinks, eternal life is not something that we should want, even if we could have it.

Can you imagine a kind of eternal life which would be worth wanting? Can reflection what sort of eternal life would be worth wanting tell us anything about what we ought to value?