

Death: a mortal answer¹

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*omnes denique miseros, qui hac luce careant*²

- Cicero

Abstract

At one time or another every human being will be troubled by death. One may be troubled by the idea of death, or one may be troubled by what death is. Under the idea of death, I include the *prospect* of death for people one cares about and for oneself; but being troubled by what death is, is to be troubled by the *nature* or the *realisation* of death, which is to say what death (being dead) entails for the subject. Of course, those are not two definitively separate concerns. I am interested in something Lucretius is famous for saying about death, that it should not in fact trouble us, and that it only troubles us because we misunderstand something about the nature of death; we think that nonexistence could be bad for us, hence we are right to fear it: all this, says Lucretius, is a mistake arising from misunderstanding death. In this paper I argue that Lucretius is wrong in saying that we should not be troubled by death because (1) the very thing he thinks is irrational to fear *is* rational to fear, and (2) his argument is self-defeating. In short, (1) annihilation, or the absence of the subject's point of view anywhere, is a reasonable thing to fear; (2) Lucretius erroneously relies on a conflation of the stateless nature of annihilation with the present experienceable nature of the human being to sustain his conclusion. I conclude that, *qua* Lucretius's argument, it is the very *loss* of the possibility of having possibilities, which fact is entailed simply by being alive, that humans fear, and are quite rational to fear.

About the author

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¹ The reader will appreciate that I am indebted for the derivation of my title from Thomas Nagel's (2015) famous and celebrated collection of essays entitled *Mortal Questions*, the first essay of which has as its subject matter and title "death".

² Quoted in Segal (1990:19), his translation reads: "The misery of death consists in lacking the light of life". Originally from Cicero's *Tuscan Disputations* (1.6.11).

At one time or another every human being will be troubled by death. As I see it there are at least two prominent ways one may be troubled by death. One may be troubled by the idea of death, or one may be troubled by what death is. Under the idea of death, I include the prospect of death for people one cares about and for oneself; but being troubled by what death is, is to be troubled by the nature of death, which is to say what death entails for the subject. Of course, those are not two definitively separate concerns. What one takes death actually to consist in certainly will have a great influence in how the prospect of death affects one. In other words, if there is an afterlife, and one knows (or believes) this, then death is likely to affect one very differently than if one knows (or believes) there is no afterlife. And, of course, knowledge about the nature of 'what it is like to be dead', the phenomenological nature of death, is, from our corporeal perspective, an absurdity.¹ I am interested in something Lucretius is famous for saying about death: that it should not in fact trouble us. It only troubles us because we think it is somehow bad for us, but, he argues, death cannot be bad for us because there is no us after death. We misunderstand what death is. In this paper I will reflect on why Lucretius was wrong in believing that we ought not to fear death. I argue that we are right to fear death while we are alive, not because of something that will happen to us after we pass out of existence, but because the prospect of passing out of existence is rational cause for fear to the living.

First, a point of clarification. For the sake of this argument, because it is what Lucretius believed, 'death' refers to the annihilation of the experiencing/living subject; as to whether this is the case or not, I take no position in this paper. I merely explore some ground *if* the annihilation hypothesis is

¹ The absurdity is wittily brought out by Van Niekerk (1999:408): "The death of humans has been the object of philosophical reflection since the inception of our tradition in ancient Greece [...]. This might create the impression that philosophers know

true. Let me be clear then, where the word 'death' appears in this paper I mean 'the annihilation of a life', as that is also what Lucretius meant by it. I do not claim however that this is necessarily the case. I am interested in exploring what follows *if* it is the case. Moreover, I do not expect that this argument necessarily holds true if death = annihilation of a life (I touch on this point again in the conclusion); I do however claim that it holds true regarding Lucretius's argument. I do not claim too much novelty for my view. Plutarch sketched what is in essence the same thesis (Segal, 1990:14-17), and it is in the main Nagel's (2015:1-12) view as well, although the argument I present here is different. Nagel's question was: 'Is death an evil?', whereas my question is more specific: 'Why is Lucretius's argument unconvincing?'. Perhaps what my paper seeks to add to the debate is to resolve Thomas Nagel's (2015:8-9) uncertainty in *Mortal Questions* about whether Lucretius's argument had been adequately answered. I propose that what follows is an adequate answer to Lucretius, and my answer is that Lucretius's argument fails to justify his conclusion.

2

Though very little is known about Lucretius, the little that is known may be said by way of introduction to our interlocutor. He was a Roman philosopher-poet, a contemporary of Caesar, Cicero, and Catullus, and is believed to have died in his early forties (Johnson, 1963:7). He was an Epicurean. It is not my purpose here to explain what being an adherent to Epicurus's doctrine entailed. Suffice it to say that it has among its prominent features a combination of what might be called a minimalist hedonism and something of the atomism first attributed to Democritus (Taylor, 1911); both suffuse Lucretius's work. Lucretius venerated Epicurus, in L. L. Johnson's (1963:7) words, as "the master-mind of all time". His only poem *De Rerum*

something other mortals sorely lack: knowledge of what death is". He argues the point of the epistemological impossibility of imagining what it is like to be dead (1999:409).

Natura, or “On the Nature of Things”, remains an influential work.

Lucretius’s argument is bound up with his poetry; roughly, it spans the last division of the third book of the *De Rerum Natura*, some more than 260 lines. I will content myself with two summaries and some adequate quotations. Lucretius (1963:108) concludes: “Nothing to us, then, is death”. He provides what has subsequently been called the ‘Symmetry Argument’ to substantiate this conclusion:

Look back: se’st how the bygone duration of
time the eternal, Ere we were born, was as
nothing to us: this Nature to us holds Up as a
mirror of ages to follow, when are we
departed.

Aught is there, therefore, in this of a horrible
aspect, of gloomy

Mien? Is it not more tranquil than any repose
whatsoever? (Lucretius, 1963:112).

I find the argument very elegantly presented by Thomas Nagel (2015:7): “no one finds it disturbing to contemplate the eternity preceding his own birth, [therefore] it must be irrational to fear death, since death is simply the mirror image of the prior abyss”. Such is the Lucretian argument on the matter.

On the Lucretian view, then, there is being, and the termination of being is annihilation. To be a living thing is for there to be a corresponding way how it is like being that thing. In fact, we could just as easily say the same without including the phrase ‘a living thing’ because that is necessarily implied in the bare statement ‘to be’, as Hamlet discovered to his great consternation. So, Lucretius is quite right about this: there is nothing it is like not to be living, because the

necessary condition of having a ‘how it is like to be a so-and-so’² is to be living. If death is annihilation of the subject, then being dead is not another state in some way analogous to the state of being alive – it is the nullification of the possibility of being in any state whatever, precisely because it is the nullification of the subject.

And that may be what gives cause for human consternation about the matter. Lucretius is right about his proposition that it is irrational to fear death because it is non-being and we have nothing to fear while being in such a state, *because* there is no such state. But just precisely because he is right about that, that there is nothing to fear while ‘being’ in a state of non-being, his inference that we are altogether wrong to fear death is inadequate because it is the very *cessation* of being alive, of having the chance of possessing a state at all, that may justifiably be the object of fear (Nagel, 2015:7-8). To put the point another way, to be alive is to have a perspective on the world, where having a perspective is both a necessary condition and a limiting factor on possibility (Reginster, 2006:84). It is a necessary condition because being alive is a precondition in possessing a set of possibilities; this entails having a perspective on the world, and having a perspective is a limiting factor inasmuch as it determines the set of one’s possibilities. Therefore, to die is to lose that perspective (one’s view on the world), and so to lose a necessary condition of possibility *qua* oneself.

3

Much can be and has been said about the paradoxical notions of ‘being’ and ‘becoming’.³ On the one hand ‘being’ is a state, a stable way of ‘how it is like to be a

²The reader will appreciate this famous Nagelian formulation from the celebrated essay ‘What it is like to be a bat’, which is also to be found in his collection *Mortal Questions* (2015:166).

³Poster (1996:2) situates the distinction as *the* debate among the ancient Greeks: “The central opposition in early Greek thought is not one between sophists and philosophers, but one between schools of being (Xenophanes, Parmenides, Zeno, Gorgias) and becoming (Heraclitus, Protagoras, Cratylus)”. Korsgaard’s (2012:2-5) brief discussion of Platonic and Aristotelian metaphysics is a discussion of the problem posed for their systems by the resistance

of ‘being’ (the way matter is) against ‘becoming’ (the way matter should be), and the revolution she speaks of is the change in our conception in what ‘being’ (*as the way matter is*) consists of. See Lloyd (1902:404-415, especially 414) for some paradoxes of ‘being’ drawn out of the Eleatic philosophy, and for a similar line to Korsgaard’s drawn from the problem of ‘becoming’ as posed by Heraclitus. See Bolton (1975:66-67) for a survey of distinctions current at the time between the two concepts in the Platonic tradition.

so-and-so', while on the other hand 'becoming' is a state of flux. Though, of course, 'becoming' is not really a state in the former sense at all because it is not stable; perhaps it is best thought of as the movement from one stable state to another. Since at every moment of a life there is a corresponding state of 'how it is like to be the so-and-so that is alive', it follows that 'becoming' is part and parcel of 'being', and that we are always subject to the possibility of change by virtue of being alive. So, it might be said in the sense just described that 'being' necessarily involves 'becoming': to possess a state is at one and the same time to be open to alteration of that state. Being alive necessarily carries with it the possibility of possibilities. Being dead, however, is the total preclusion of all possibility.⁴

There is no state for me or for you of being dead. If there were such a state, then we would be confronted with absurd questions surrounding 'how it is like to be David that is dead' as compared to 'how it is like to be Jones that is dead', or equally absurdly 'how it is like to be a dead ant' as compared to 'how it is like to be a dead mole'. For if there were such a phenomenological experience it would have to differ across particular instances within kinds and across kinds themselves, just as it does when we are living.⁵ But that is only because we can only know of phenomenology as it pertains to the living. There is no phenomenology of death for the dead, otherwise they would in some way be alive albeit this be a possibility of which we have no knowledge. Death, understood as annihilation, is the absence of a state-of-being, and so the absence of the flux of becoming also: the absence of all possibility.

⁴ Heidegger (1995:294) makes the point on death as the absence of possibility.

⁵ David's experience as human being differs from Jones's experience as human being, and both their experiences differ more substantially from what it is like to be a bat.

⁶ She allows that if living forever entailed (1) a change or preclusion of certain seminal self-forming things (because of the non-limitlessness of resources) and or (2) being alone in being immortal, then one may rationally choose not to live forever

Living beings only fear present and future occurrences because they fear things that will happen *to them* or *to others*. We can imagine King Henry VI saying: "I fear that the battle for France was lost last month", and we understand him perfectly as meaning not that he fears an event in the past having occurred, but the current and future results of such an event that had occurred. To take another example, Hamlet cannot fear the prospect of not being alive before he is alive. To do that he would have to be alive before he is alive (in order for his fear to be prospective) and *that* indeed would be irrational! The point of these examples is to reiterate Nagel's (2015:5-8) point on the direction of time: we experience time as moving forward, never backwards, and our possibilities are always temporally located relative to other possibilities. Simon (2010) proposes that the forward causation of time gives rational credence to 'a gambler's response' to Lucretius's symmetry argument. Here is his argument: if one feared death one could wish to extend the quantity of time one is alive either by being born earlier or dying later. If the former, then one runs the risk of dying sooner because there are a series of new unknown dangers that could bring one's life to an end; if the latter, no such dangers are incurred, and thus one is guaranteed a longer life if that wish is granted. Therefore, on a balance of probabilities, it is rational to want to live longer but not be born earlier and, importantly, the symmetry argument fails, equating time before birth with time after death is a false equation. Indeed, Martha Nussbaum (2013) holds that there is nothing irrational (indeed, it is very rational) to want to live an immortal life, *ceteris paribus*,⁶

(Nussbaum, 2013). This part of the argument is contentious, for the simple reason that we cannot seriously imagine what (1) would be like and so it is difficult to make sense of the constraint, and (2) though sad, does not affect the ability of the immortal individual to have good experiences, i.e., to carry on living. While these are challenges to the immortal view, they are not logical defeaters. My argument is not to do with immortality, however, but only why we are rational to fear death.

because the experiences possible through being alive are good, some she thinks are even inexhaustible.

It would, to return to the reality of forward causation in time, be inappropriate (because impossible!) to project an intentional state into the past T_1 regarding some future T_2 when the time projected from in the past T_1 is also a time where one did not exist (as in the Hamlet example). It would be similarly inappropriate to project an intentional state of 'fearing the potential outcome of some future occurrence' when that (now previously future occurrence) had already occurred (that is the point of the Henry VI example). In other words, any future is a relative concept to present time such that a moment that once was in the future can obviously fall into the past, but fear, being prospective, can only be future directed *from the present*. We can only fear *forward toward* the future, never *before* the present. For Lucretius's argument to work he requires that we *could* fear the past just as we could fear the future, since we do not (and since it would be irrational to) fear the past (before existence), he argues, so we should recognise it is irrational to fear the future (after existence). However, I have shown it is impossible in the present to fear the time before coming into existence, while it remains possible to fear the future from the present.

If we should not be worried by death for the reason that we were not worried before we existed, and in the same way death is the period of time after existence, then we should have no qualms about bringing death upon us – I do not mean we would be positively motivated to die, but I think if Lucretius were correct, we should be indifferent about dying. If there is nothing to worry about when we die, we should not care if we die or live. But we do care very strongly whether we die or live, and I submit that the reason for this is because Lucretius has misdiagnosed the problem. The problem of death as annihilation is a problem of annihilation. Lucretius sought to attack the problem by showing it is impossible to fear being annihilated because there is no you to instance the mental state of being afraid, just as before one's coming to be.

I have argued that while Lucretius is correct in this, he is wrong in jumping to the unwarranted conclusion that we as living beings who can instance the mental state of being afraid, ought not to be afraid of not having any mental states because once we are dead we cannot be afraid any longer, nor experience any unpleasantness – as a consequence of being dead, of course. *He* jumped from a reality of non-being to an injunction on being, and any such jump is incoherent because the total cessation of one's being (*not the prospect of that cessation*) cannot have any influence on one's being (Lucretius is quite right about that) – there is *nothing there* to have an influence on the living subject.

My argument differs from Lucretius's in that I say, 'We are, and we cease to be, and our ceasing to be is cause for fear', while Lucretius says, 'We were not, and we will not be, and as we were not afraid before we existed so ought we not to be afraid about what lies after our existence because it is *nothing*'. I say that the loss of being alive, the prospect of nothingness, is what we are right to fear; Lucretius, I think, contradicts himself when he says that we should not fear death because there is nothing there that can affect us. The problem is many people do at some point fear death, and since there is nothing there that can affect us to cause fear, so too is there nothing there to affect us to allay our fear. That is Lucretius's contradiction. If there is nothing there that can affect us, as he says, then he has no right to use that nothing to affect us out of our fear, for his argument is that we are irrational to let nothing affect us in the first place. 'Nothing' is a useless tool, regardless which side of the argument one is on. Indeed, one can very cogently imagine 'nothing' is so useless a tool because it is no tool at all.

5

In conclusion, my argument has advanced the following claims:

1. What it means to possess a state of 'how it is like to be a so-and-so' is necessarily to be subject to possibility

because being alive has something of the essence of possibility structurally built into it.

2. Death is the absence of being and by virtue of that also becoming, so the preclusion of the possibility of possibility.

3. Lucretius is right, then, that there is nothing it is *like to be dead*, if death is taken to be the annihilation of the phenomenological subject.

4. However, Lucretius is wrong in arguing that this should not worry us, because his argument relies on a conflation of being alive with non-being (being dead), inasmuch as it relies on an influence of non-being in the future upon the phenomenological subject or being of the present. The currently existing subject is supposed to be influenced by the non-influence that non-being carries for the state of being. In other words, the fact that I will cease to be entails that there *will be* no I to care that there is no I. But this claim rests on the assumption

that the future absence of my being, that which is I, will move me *while I am still around* not to worry about my death. But death's troubling, *if* someone considers the annihilation hypothesis to be true, is the troubling of annihilation: the fact that there will be no 'I' is what is troubling to the subject, that is why we are not indifferent to death and would rather be alive.

Therefore, *qua* Lucretius's argument, it is quite rational for human beings to fear death, if death is taken to mean the annihilation of the phenomenological subject, as it has been taken to mean in this paper. This does not necessarily entail that if death = annihilation we must have to fear death; but it does seem to imply that fearing death should be the default position in the absence of any successful arguments to the contrary. If a person does not have cogent reasons *not* to fear death, then they are rational to fear it, and irrational not to fear it. To continue this theme, however, is not my purpose with this paper. That notwithstanding, then, I submit: Lucretius's argument has been answered.

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