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### Annihilation

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## ANNIHILATION

I do not want to die--no; I neither want to die nor do  
I want to want to die; I want to live for ever and ever  
and ever.

Miguel de Unamuno, *Tragic Sense of Life*

Like Unamuno, many people find it abhorrent to think that well within 90 years they are going to die and utterly cease to exist. Those who believe that they will never cease to exist (perhaps because they think of dying as a transition to an afterlife in which they will live forever) are usually happy about it, and would not willingly forgo the immortality they expect. People who look upon annihilation as a grim prospect certainly may be well aware that under certain circumstances it must be regarded as the lesser of the evils among which choice is limited.<sup>1</sup> They realize that it may be the only escape from a spate of creatively cruel torture, for example, and so a better option than suffering further pain. They may even be willing to say that if their lives were long enough and their possibilities exhausted, then insufferable boredom would set in.<sup>2</sup> And dying after a short life of (say) 100 years might be better than being forced to live on into a future that consists of an eternity of empty, indistinguishable days. But to acknowledge that there are worse fates than annihilation in the near future, is not to deny that it is a terrible fate. Aside from a future filled with the agonies or boredom of the damned, a worse fate than no future at all is difficult to imagine. It may be that forever is longer than anyone would voluntarily live; but how many would refuse the chance to drink a potion that would allow them to live as long as they liked?

Even people who argue that dying is not a bad thing do not really seem to believe what they are saying.<sup>3</sup> More often than not, their anxiety to believe in the innocuousness of their demise prevents even brilliant thinkers from realizing that their arguments are inane. Epicurus' famous argument, for example, is about as absurd as any I have seen: Death is nothing to us. It concerns neither the living nor the dead, since for the former it is not, and the latter are no more.<sup>4</sup>

Make no mistake about it: when Epicurus speaks here of death, he means annihilation, and his claim is that annihilation is nothing to us. The self-deception of people like Epicurus is not conscious; we cannot relieve our anxiety by swallowing beliefs of whose inanity we are aware. But deception is nonetheless at work.

Let us assume with Epicurus that death means annihilation. Then can we truthfully say that death is nothing to us? I think not. Nor should we want to believe that the deaths we will soon face are nothing to us, I shall argue. Once we see what we would have to be like in order to be truly as unconcerned about dying as Epicurus professed to be, we will see that we are better off dreading our dying day. However, I shall suggest that there are steps we can take to ensure that if luck is on our side, dying will not be as bad a thing for us as it is capable of being. But few are so lucky.

### I. The Misfortune of Dying

Why should anyone believe that dying (thought of as annihilation) is a misfortune? One suggestion begins with the observation that something is a misfortune for us if it thwarts our desires.<sup>5</sup> You would do me an evil if you stole my cherished pet, since thereby you prevent me from fulfilling my desire to live in peace with my pet. On the other hand, if all I wanted for my pet was that it lead a reasonably comfortable life, and it was not my wish that it be me who provided for its comfort, then you would do me no harm if you stole my pet so long as you saw to its well-being. In so doing you would not have thwarted my desires.

It seems reasonable to say, then, that whatever prevents me from getting what I want is a misfortune for me. But if something that thwarts my desires is an evil for me, then dying is an evil for me (though perhaps the lesser of all the evils that are inevitable in my circumstances), since it thwarts my desires. Of course, to say that dying thwarts my desires is to understand 'thwarting my desires' liberally. An event can prevent me from fulfilling my desires not just by frustrating my attempts to fulfill them, but also by removing my desires. If an event pulls one of my desires out by the roots, it certainly does prevent me from fulfilling it. It is in this sense that dying thwarts my desires. It is a misfortune for me for the same reason that being forced to swallow a drug that washes away my desires (including my desire not to have swallowed the drug) is a misfortune for me.

We have said that dying is a bad thing for us since it frustrates our desires. However, a more accurate way to put matters is that dying is bad for us if it thwarts our desires. On the strength of the premise that what thwarts my desires is a misfortune for me, we cannot conclude that my dying is a bad thing for me unless I have desires that would be thwarted by my death. A death which comes when I have exhausted all of my ambitions will be a welcome release from a life destined to be one of excruciating emptiness.

An objection can even be made to the thesis that a death which frustrates its victim's desires is an evil. Suppose that at some point in our lives the only goals we do have left would fail to be rewarding or would even make us miserable if we were to achieve them. We would not judge something to be an evil for us if the only goals it frustrated or eradicated were ones which would prove to be unfulfilling or ones which would make us miserable if we were to accomplish them. So dying at a time that interrupts only our pursuit of such goals should not be regarded as a misfortune for us. But an important sort of death, it would seem, remains an evil, namely, one that prevents its victims from fulfilling fulfilling desires. Call such a death a premature one. Even prematurity as we have defined it is not an infallible sign of a regrettable end; however, it will serve us well enough.

## **II. Epicureans**

The idea that a premature death is a misfortune for its victim seems rather obvious. I believe that it has been responsible for most of the anxiety which people (such as I) have felt about dying; it seems to them very likely that they are going to die prematurely even if they live to be 120 years old, which they will not. Their plans stretch far out into their futures, and they see no reason why a hundred years from now they would not plan ahead with equal fervor--if it were not for the realization that they cannot survive the inevitable physical breakdown of their bodies which is soon to take place.

Those of us who are uncomfortable or even bitter about dying are appalled by the cheerful indifference of people who are capable of agreeing with Epicurus' absurd claim that "death is nothing to us." What would people have to be like to really think that their deaths are nothing to them (assuming that their lack of concern is not simply due to their refusal to dwell upon 'morbid' subjects)? The answer, as we shall see, is that to the extent that such people are understandable at all, they are rather coldhearted and passionless. Having said that, I nonetheless want to claim that they are worth careful study. By emulating a certain sort of 'Epicurean,' as I shall call an individual who is indifferent to dying, it may be possible for others to acquire a measure of equanimity in the face of death without adopting the less desirable characteristics of Epicureans. But before I describe the kind of Epicurean it would behoove us to become, I shall describe others whose ways we should shun.

Virtually the only thing worse than the prospect of spending eternity in unmitigated agony is the prospect of spending eternity in even more intense agony. It is obvious that dying would be better than either fate. But Epicureans could agree only if they were not completely indifferent to dying. To agree, they must be willing to admit that under some circumstances dying can be the best of all available alternatives because of the escape it provides. Yet this they cannot do. The fact that the Epicureans are completely indifferent to dying means that they never under any circumstances want to die nor want not to die, and that is possible only if under no circumstances do they prefer dying to anything nor anything to dying. This makes Epicureans considered as completely indifferent to dying extremely foreign; hence let us try to describe Epicureans whose indifference is somewhat limited. Our Epicureans are capable of thinking that dying is preferable to some alternatives, since it allows them to escape from an unbearable mode of life. But they remain incapable of thinking that there is an alternative than which dying is worse. For them, dying is no worse than (i.e., it is at least as good as) remaining alive no matter how utopian life might be. They believe that dying can be a good thing, but they cannot believe that it is ever a bad thing.

Because Epicureans prefer dying to various possibilities, they must be capable of having desires whose form can be expressed as follows:

I want the following to be the case:

Were X not the case at given time t, then I would be dead at t.<sup>6</sup>

Call desires of this form escape desires. They set out conditions under which life is so bad that, according to the Epicureans, death is preferable. If Epicureans had no desires of this form, they would be incapable of ranking dying over living no matter what living entailed, even if living meant torture of the worst sort.

I think that we can make a further assumption about Epicureans, namely, even they must agree that a premature death as we defined it is a misfortune for its victim. It would be absurd for them to adopt an attitude of indifference when they face premature death since that would entail being unconcerned about something that prevents them from fulfilling desires which they very much wish to fulfill.

Perhaps, however, it is hasty to think that the prospect of a premature death would dismay the otherwise unflappable Epicureans. Why couldn't they adopt the view that whatever causes us neither pain nor pleasure is a matter of indifference? This, in fact, was Epicurus' own hedonistic view:<sup>7</sup> something can be bad, he believed, only if it causes us pain; and something can be good only if it causes us pleasure. On the strength of the hedonistic criterion, Epicureans could claim that dying is nothing to us even if it does thwart our desires since it causes us neither pain nor pleasure. They would admit that the disease or aging process which causes us to die may be a bad thing; these causes of death may bring us experiences whose unpleasantness is formidable. But dying causes no sensations at all, they would point out. In fact, it brings about an end to all sensing. We lack even the opportunity to regret the fact that death has thwarted our desires; once we die, we experience neither pain, pleasure, nor regret for the simple reason that we experience nothing at all.

But isn't it a tragedy that death deprives us even of the opportunity to experience, to delight, and to regret?<sup>8</sup>

Consider the consequences of the hedonistic view. On this view, an event which would cause me great pain if I were to find out about it is a matter of indifference so long as I in fact never do. The fact that my spouse and children have fallen for the lies of my enemy and now hate me but are pretending not to is of no concern to me, according to hedonists, if my ignorance prevents that

event from causing me any grief. Moreover, hedonists would cheerfully consent to being used in any way we like so long as we promise to precede their treatment with a drug that makes them enjoy what we do to them, or at least a drug which suppresses any unpleasant experiences that might otherwise result from the abuses we have planned for them. I will not bother to list sadistic atrocities which the hedonists can be made to welcome.

At best, hedonistically inclined Epicureans could say that whatever would cause us neither pain nor pleasure if we were aware of it while not under the influence of powerful psychotropic drugs (nor the like) is neither good nor bad. But this weakened sort of hedonism is not strong enough for their purposes. People who found out that their desires were going to be thwarted would be distressed by their discovery; they could not regard it as a matter of indifference. Nor could they be indifferent to that which thwarts their desires, and dying is one of the things that does.<sup>9</sup>

Epicureans never regard dying as a misfortune. But I have said that they would have to regard it as a misfortune if dying thwarted desires whose satisfaction would be fulfilling. Hence Epicureans must not have any fulfilling desires that can be frustrated by death! Death for them can never be premature or else it would be a bad thing; therefore they must be so constituted that any time death comes it is mature. Assuming that Epicureans have goals, then either they are unfulfilling ones, or else they are ones that cannot be thwarted by death. If Epicureans had any other sort of goal, they could not be unconcerned about premature death.

But what would a desire that cannot be thwarted by death be like? One desire that obviously is impervious to death is the desire to die. Rather than being thwarted by my death, my goal to die is achieved through my death. Like the death wish, escape desires are also invulnerable to death. They are qualified desires for death: they say that if certain conditions are met, we wish to be dead. But they do not imply that there are any conditions under which we do not want to be dead. Hence death presents no obstacle to our satisfying them.

Nor does the list of relevant desires end there. Some of our aims are such that our chances of successfully accomplishing them are not really affected by what we do in the course of our lives or even by whether or not we are alive. Being alive does not help us achieve these ends; hence they cannot be thwarted by our deaths. Since the likelihood that such goals will be achieved does not depend on what we do with our lives, let us call these independent goals. Ones whose chances of being achieved do depend on our activities we can call dependent goals. My desire that the moon continue to orbit Earth, for example, is an independent goal; it cannot provide me any grounds for deploring death since the behavior of Earth and its satellite is unaffected by what I do in the course of my life.

Goals that were dependent in the earlier part of my life can become independent as time passes. If at some point I fully accomplish my dependent goal of at least once visiting France, then thereafter it is independent. No matter what I do thereafter, I cannot make it more nor less likely than at least once I set foot in France. Even my subsequent death would not reduce my chances of achieving that end. People whose dependent ends once made them vulnerable to premature death could therefore become less vulnerable by rendering those ends independent.

There is another, more interesting type of desire that is invulnerable to our deaths. Suppose that we care about the situation at some future time, but only on the assumption that we will be alive at that time; if we think that we will be dead, we are indifferent about the situation. Suicidal depressants, for example, might take this view. They may strongly wish to be dead, and they may be totally indifferent to anything that may or may not happen once they are dead; yet they still may have the attitude that if they are to be alive, they should be well fed. They desire something--in this

case being well fed--only on the assumption or condition that they will continue to be alive. It will be useful to characterize such conditional desires in a more formal way. My conditional desire concerning some situation X is one that takes the following form:

I want the following to be the case:

Were I alive at t, X would be the case at t.<sup>10</sup>

Desires that are not in this way contingent on our being alive call unconditional.

Conditional desires are not independent desires. However, both dependent and independent goals are capable of being conditionalized, i.e., converted into conditional goals. Consider the dependent desire to be well fed, for example. As the case of the suicidal depressants mentioned a moment ago shows, it is entirely possible to possess a conditionalized desire to be well fed. My independent desire that the moon continue to orbit the sun can be conditionalized as well. I need only decide that what is important to me is the moon's orbit while I live.

### **III. The Epicurean Attitude Toward Life**

As far as I can tell, the catalogue of desires which cannot be thwarted by death is limited to escape desires, independent desires, and conditional desires. Not one of the types of goal we have catalogued can be frustrated by death, and any other type of goal would be vulnerable to death. Epicureans must possess no fulfilling desires except the sort we have catalogued. This is the secret of their equanimity: since none of their fulfilling desires can be thwarted by death, then Epicureans never regard death as a misfortune. Since limiting their desires to the catalogued sorts is the only way Epicureans could ensure that death is no evil for them, however, we shall want to consider what kind of person they have had to become as a result of that limitation. Only then can we decide whether it would be a good idea to follow their example.

Consider their motivation to take up the activities in which we normally engage. Since Epicureans never have any reason to avoid dying, it may appear that they have no reason to do anything (with the possible exception of committing suicide). But this is an important mistake. It is true that their independent desires cannot provide Epicureans grounds for any activities since by definition these are desires about whose fulfillment Epicureans can do nothing of importance. However, conditional desires do provide strong reason for action. Such desires can enable Epicureans to take an interest in things for which life is a precondition. While indifferent to the prospect of dying in their sleep, Epicureans may take the attitude that if they do awake, their wakeful days should be spent in vigorous pursuit of an exciting career, in raising a family, etc. And for this to be possible, they will need to seek an education and work long hours in pursuit of a career.

But wouldn't they necessarily be indifferent to their health? No, since it would be eminently reasonable for them to want to spend their days--if days they will indeed spend--in the comparative comfort and convenience of health rather than the discomfort of disease. It is not necessary to want to avoid dying in order to want to do things that tend to make dying unlikely. The fact that our goals make our deaths unlikely can be an unintended sideeffect. Even Epicureans who are no longer living out of inertia but who have developed a positive wish to die may be unable to commit suicide because of a strong aversion to pain.

Suppose that someone went around injecting Epicureans with painless but deadly poison. Wouldn't an Epicurean society have to be indifferent about that practice, since it would not interfere with any Epicurean's desires? No, precisely because it would interfere. It is true that an Epicurean cannot abhor these murders on the grounds that they are bad for their victims. But the murders could be abhorred (unless they involve the massacre of entire societies or the entire human race)

because they deprive people of their loved ones. The murders are bad for the survivors, who wanted to share their lives (if lives they shall lead) with the victims. Even pariahs who have no strong ties are likely to play a positive role in society somewhere. But if the pariahs play no useful role whatever, Epicureans could condemn the murder of pariahs only on the grounds that if that sort of thing were permitted it might lead people to kill those who do have a role to play. Anyone who is inclined to condemn Epicureans on the grounds that they do not appreciate how bad murder is should, however, recall that the victims themselves are to their very cores genuinely indifferent to dying. How bad can it be to do something to someone who is incapable of anything except absolute indifference about what you plan to do?

So far, adopting the Epicurean approach may not seem terribly unattractive. If something which is a bad thing for us given our present desires turns out to be inevitable, then why not alter our desires so that we no longer must regard the inevitable as an evil?<sup>11</sup> Dying is inevitable, so why not disarm it by limiting ourselves to the desires of Epicureans? Unfortunately, the indifference to dying which the Epicurean approach would secure us comes at a price most of us will not be willing to pay. The attraction of the Epicurean way of looking at things is that they do not care whether their lives are shorter than usual or longer than usual; death, whenever it comes, is nothing to them. However, Epicureans think that death is nothing to them only because they think that life is nothing to them. They are capable of their indifference to death only because they have pared down their concerns to the point that life is now a matter of indifference to them. For in avoiding all aspirations that can be thwarted by death, Epicureans have had to avoid all desires which are capable of giving Epicureans a reason for living. In order to maintain their unconcern about dying, they must avoid having any reason whatsoever for not dying. However, any reason for living is an excellent reason for not dying; so only if they avoid having any reason for living can they avoid having any reason for not dying.

The extent to which Epicureans have sabotaged their motivation for living can be brought out by examining the desires to which they are limited, desires that are invulnerable to death. Independent goals (unlike dependent ones) are incapable of giving us reason to remain alive and to avoid dying since our lives and the things we do with our lives play no role toward the achievement of such goals. Conditional desires are similarly impotent; because they apply only on the assumption that we are alive, they cannot provide grounds for being alive. Like the other desires Epicureans possess, escape desires (as well as the death wish itself) are incapable of providing any reason to remain alive; on the contrary, escape desires provide reason to die. Beyond conditional, independent, and escape desires, the only other desires Epicureans can have are unfulfilling ones, and these are obviously as impotent as the others with respect to motivating Epicureans to live. Out of the desires possessed by Epicureans, then, a case for remaining alive cannot be built. Since they limit their desires to those listed above, and so consider dying at least as good as any other option, it is useful to characterize the Epicurean personality as death-tolerant.<sup>12</sup> By contrast, the personality of people who have unconditional desires that make living desirable can be called life-affirming.

Since Epicureans cannot allow themselves any motivation to live, they must ensure that they never think that it would be good to live. For to say that living is good certainly implies that it is preferable to dying, which is a view Epicureans must eschew. On their view, living no sort of life would be better than dying. A conception of a good or worthwhile life is a description of a life that would be good to live; such a conception Epicureans completely lack. (What they can have is a conception of a life such that it is a matter of indifference whether it is lived.) To make sure they do not develop one, moreover, they must be very selective in their activities. If an activity or set of

activities promises to be so enjoyable that it threatens to make a life spent in pursuit of that activity good, then those who wish to retain with a death-tolerant personality must abandon it in haste, or at least take steps that ensure that they do not enjoy what they do so much that they begin to show an interest in living. They must fill their lives with blander fare.

Nothing said here supports the claims, occasionally made, that life's being meaningful or worthwhile is due to the fact that we die,<sup>13</sup> or that life is meaningless because we die.<sup>14</sup> Both claims imply that it is due to death that life has the value it does, which is not true. A life can be made neither good nor bad by the fact that it will eventually end, any more than a car can be made good or bad by the fact that it will eventually be scrapped. A life has the value it does quite independently of the fact that it will end. In fact, death has the value it does due to the value of the life it ends. Speaking roughly, dying is a bad thing when living on would be good, and when living on would be bad, dying is good.

Because Epicureans are not interested in anything that could lead them to regard living as a good thing, they do not care about anything that they believe will happen after they die, ignoring what they care about through their independent desires, which (as we have seen) have no motivational power in the Epicureans' lives anyway. Those with a death-tolerant personality live out of inertia most of the time, acting only under the influence of their conditional desires unless life becomes unpleasant enough to opt out of. But the interest which they take in things through the agency of their conditional desires does not extend beyond what they believe to be the temporal boundaries of their lives. For given that their entire attitude about whether or not a given state of affairs X holds at some time t is conditional, then if they believed that they would be dead at t, then they would be indifferent about whether or not X would hold at t. This makes Epicureans peculiar people indeed. Out of her conditional desire for their well-being, an Epicurean mother may well be concerned about whether her children will survive an imminent catastrophe, but only if she assumes that she too will survive. Her conditional desires leave her completely indifferent to their welfare if she assumes that she will die. Nor does the peculiar pattern of her concern for her offspring end here. She may well place herself between a crazed beast and her children since she does not think that her life will be bearable to her if they die, and so is willing to risk her life in their defense. Her life means nothing to her in any case. But she is incapable of writing a will or taking out life insurance out of concern for her children's well-being after she dies, even if she knows that they will lead a horrible existence if she fails to act. Whether their lives go well or poorly after she dies is a matter of utter indifference to her.

Still less could Epicureans desire the welfare of future generations. Because their concern for others is conditional, Epicureans cannot believe that the welfare of future generations matters at all, though the welfare of their contemporaries may be important to them.

Nonetheless, it is conceivable that Epicureans have a conditional desire to spend their days working for the benefit of future generations. They could take the attitude that so long as they are to go on, they shall work for the benefit of posterity. And an Epicurean mother could decide that so long as she is alive tomorrow, she shall spend it working to ensure that her children flourish after she dies. However, these attitudes are not to be mistaken for concern about what occurs after the Epicureans die. Epicureans just do not care what happens then. They are capable only of indifference about the well-being of posterity, and an Epicurean mother could not care less about the welfare of her children after she believes she will die. Therefore, even if Epicureans take an interest in working for the welfare of posterity, they remain indifferent to the welfare of posterity. It takes peculiar people to desire to spend time ensuring that some state of affairs holds in the future even though they are indifferent about whether that state of affairs comes to be. As a matter of



psychological fact, it may be impossible. So since Epicureans must sustain their indifference about the future if they are to remain Epicureans, it may be impossible for them to want to spend time influencing the future.

It is worth noting that Epicureans will remain unconcerned about what occurs after their projected dying day if they adopt the hedonist claim that everything which does not actually cause them pain or pleasure is a matter of indifference. Hedonists of this sort are capable of caring about the welfare of their children, but only their welfare at times when the hedonist parents believe that they (the parents) will be alive. For they realize that dead parents can be caused neither pain nor pleasure by the fate of their children. Earlier I argued that hedonism is too implausible to sustain the judgment that premature death is no evil. Here we have a fresh reason to steer clear of hedonism: consistent hedonists exhibit a callousness which renders their view too unsavory to adopt.

There are still more reasons not to adopt a death-tolerant personality. Quite often, conditionalizing our desires would mutilate them so much that retaining the conditionalized versions of them is something we would not want to do or are psychologically unequipped to do. Consider, for example, the conditionalized form of our altruistic concern for the welfare of others. It is probably not really possible for us to care intensely about someone's welfare up to the point at which we believe that we will die, yet be entirely indifferent to their welfare thereafter. Some of us could probably manage to be relatively unconcerned about anyone else's welfare at any time. Becoming utterly aloof in this way is probably the only way any of us could become death-tolerant, however, since none of us has the capacity to care intensely yet within sharply defined temporal boundaries.

Even the conditionalized form of a purely self-centered desire can be enormously peculiar. Our self-centered projects play an important role in our lives, and most of them can succeed only if we survive, either because we are an essential ingredient in them, as I am in my plan to become President of Money Bank, or my plan to lead a long life of adventure, or else because we play a key role in them. Hence we must conditionalize our concern for these projects if we are to emulate the Epicureans. But is a deep concern about such projects really consistent with the attitude that their failure is a matter of indifference so long as we do not live through their demise? How serious can I be about wanting to discover the cure for cancer if I am just as happy to fail so long as I do not live through my failure? The fact is that a conditionalized passion is not a passion, for we can conditionalize our passions in life only if we no longer take them seriously enough to want to live another day. Once conditionalized, they can no longer play any significant role in what might have been a worthwhile life.

#### **IV. Epicureanizing Our Desires**

Dying is a constant threat to those of us who are unable or unwilling to abandon our concern for projects and lives whose welfare depends crucially on us, and so for us death is an evil. The strategy of the Epicureans, moreover, has proved to be unavailable to those of us who have a life-affirming personality, since they owe their indifference about longevity to their indifference to living. At best, life is a burden for those with a death-tolerant personality, something to be made as free of misery as possible; it is either a bore which they can take or leave, or a curse they would be better off without. Their view is not quite that nothing is anything to us, but it comes very close. Instead of succumbing to the despairing attitude that we have nothing to live for, we would be better off immersing ourselves in projects for which we are capable of living, and resign ourselves to the fact that we cannot persist in our endeavors for long.

Although we should not emulate the Epicureans we have described, it does seem to me that there is a type of Epicurean which we should strive to become. Unlike the ones we have discussed before, the Epicureans I have in mind are anxious to squeeze as much as possible out of life. But these neo-Epicureans (as I will call them) realize that one can squeeze out of a lifetime only as much as a lifetime can hold. If people's life expectancy can be increased, they are certainly in favor of doing so, since more can be squeezed into a longer life. The opportunity to live longer is a bad thing for no one. An abundance of life might make us less anxious to pack as much as possible into each moment of our lives, but what would be the harm of living at less frenzied a pace? And of course, if there are people who cannot find anything to do with their extended lives, suicide is always an option. But neo-Epicureans realize that they are forced to accept the life expectancy that is determined by the technology of their era in history. That technology, whether advanced or primitive, determines what for them is a normal lifetime.<sup>15</sup> Neo-Epicureans have impressed upon themselves the fact that unless further advances in life extension techniques can be expected, they cannot possibly expect much more than a normal lifetime, and so they cannot allow their happiness to require more. This they accomplish partly by making an effort to commit themselves only to projects which can come to fruition within the confines of a normally extended lifetime. They realize that it is reasonable to live one's life as if on the assumption that one will survive a normal lifetime, but not to plan life as if on the assumption that one will live beyond. Hence they try to make sure that their ambitions do not extend beyond a normal lifetime except in the form of conditional desires as well as escape desires.

But the neo-Epicureans could not limit their goals in this way without abandoning much of what makes life worthwhile. For example, they would have to forgo bringing children into the world--or at least avoid developing ties to any children they do produce--since their daughters and sons cannot be counted on to come to an end just as their Epicurean parents die. (Nor, presumably, would Epicurean parents want to ensure that their children would die on schedule if seeing to their demise were possible.) The only further alternative for Epicurean parents, caught in the predicament of being unable to reproduce for fear that they may become attached to their issue, is to conditionalize their concern for their children, to adopt the absurd attitude that a child's well-being is important while its parent is alive, but entirely a matter of indifference otherwise.

Rather than adopt one of these absurd approaches, the neo-Epicureans do allow themselves some ventures which will carry over beyond the reach of a normal lifetime. If they set out to raise children, they are prepared to care about the well-being of their families even when all of their children grow into adults. Yet as parents they realize that no matter what they (the parents) do in the course of a normal lifetime, their offspring could come to grief after the parents die. Neo-Epicureans, then, are not unconcerned about everything that happens after they die. But because they are not indifferent, they try to ensure that those of their concerns that their deaths might leave vulnerable are rendered invulnerable. For example, if they plan to have children, neo-Epicurean parents will see to it that the young-sters grow into relatively self-sufficient adults, or at least that the children's well-being does not depend on the survival of their parents beyond a normal lifetime. Neo-Epicureans know that they cannot expect to survive beyond a normal lifetime, and so make sure that well before then they have fully equipped their children for life. Of course, neo-Epicureans also realize that they could die before they have equipped their children; but that does not stop them from reproducing, so long as the odds are in favor of their surviving long enough. To help minimize the possible tragedy of leaving their children parentless, they will resort to devices such as insurance.

Neo-Epicureans have a similar approach to all of their other concerns which might be left vulnerable to what occurs after their deaths. They are not indifferent to these matters; instead, and because of their concern, they see to it that the goals they are concerned about are as invulnerable to their deaths as can be. All such goals neo-Epicureans convert to independent goals, so that the success of these projects is not made less likely by their deaths. In short, as their final years approach, neo-Epicureans make themselves completely dispensable to everything they care about. Not worried that the concerns of their lifetimes will come to a bad end with their deaths, they do not regret passing away. They have, we might say, epicureanized their desires. Death which comes before they have done what they have set out to do they hate with all their hearts since it comes between them and what they consider dear. But death which comes after they have accomplished their goals or rendered their goals independent they do not grudge. It will catch the neo-Epicureans only with independent or conditional desires.

Being dispensable, however, is something that neo-Epicureans carefully postpone to the very end. Early on in life, they begin taking steps that will ensure that they will be dispensable, but--like a coffin--dispensability is something they want only when they die. For having our lives deeply intertwined with those of others is part of what makes life worthwhile. What neo-Epicureans want is not that their lives should have made no difference to anybody or anything. What they want is that their deaths should make no difference. To the extent that our being alive plays no important role in any of the matters we care about (and to the extent that we care about nothing), to that extent we have no reason to value our lives. It is the fact that we are indispensable to people and projects we care about that motivates us to live another day; we should undermine this motivation, therefore, only when we are prepared to die.

The neo-Epicurean approach to life is, I think, an attractive one. It allows those who can assume that their lifetimes will be normal to remain relatively calm about their future deaths without becoming aloof from life. But if I am not already an Epicurean, should I become one? Or should I perhaps be content to admire them from afar? If I already take an interest in projects for the success of which I would have to live far beyond a normal lifetime, I can become a neo-Epicurean only if I give up or modify those undertakings. If I find myself engaged in the pursuit of such endeavors, can I do what it takes to become a neo-Epicurean even if I want to? Are our desires sufficiently within our control that we can give certain ones of them up if we wish, perhaps replacing them with more desirable ones?

Now of course we have some goals that we cannot modify no matter how badly we might want to. To say that we should modify them is therefore absurd. (I am assuming that we are not willing to alter our desires using brainwashing or the like. More on that presently.) No one can give up the desire to avoid pure pain, for example, even masochists. They seek the pleasure which accompanies an otherwise painful experience. Like the aversion to pain, a fondness for pleasures such as gastronomic and orgasmic ones is also something we all have by virtue of our very nature; we are built that way. Nor are all of our involuntary desires visceral. Some of them are manifestations in our conscious life of underlying needs. It is human nature, for example, to need the association of other people; that is why solitary confinement is such an effective punishment. Even if we never form the conscious desire for close ties with others--indeed, even if we think we prefer a life of complete solitude--we need them all the same; because of our human nature we would be miserable without them.

But not all desires are so deeply rooted as those which stem from underlying needs. And these shallower ambitions tend to be more malleable. My desire to acquire a cat, for example, is easily abandoned. To drop it, it may be sufficient for me to discover that I am violently allergic to

fur. Whether I should change desires that are subject to voluntary manipulation is, therefore, an open question.

Even desires that are to some extent malleable cannot be changed under just any circumstances. Changing a desire is not like changing the position of our hands; we can move our hands at whim, but we cannot desire at whim. But usually we can make substantial changes in our desires when it is clear to us that it is rational for us to do so. The cat was out as soon as I saw that owning it meant suffering. In speaking about modifications which we can or cannot make in our desires, I have been assuming that we do not resort to measures involving brainwashing or the chemical or surgical manipulation of our brains. However, I see no reason why in principle we should not make desirable changes in our scheme of desires using hypnosis, chemicals, or other sorts of artificial methods. In fact, such artificial methods are constantly invoked already. People who wish to give up smoking are well served by hypnotists who help them conquer their urge for cigarettes, for example. To countenance artificial methods is not to advocate forced manipulations of people's desires, or course, any more than to recommending hypnosis to a reluctant smoker is to kidnap and brainwash a smoker who is happy only with tobacco. The suggestion is just that if individuals decide that it really would be desirable to epicureanize their aspirations, they may as well use artificial means of doing so rather than limiting themselves to what they can achieve through sheer willpower.

In order for us to avoid forming a desire, or to abandon one we have already formed, it is often sufficient that we come to realize that we cannot possibly fulfill it. But not always. Moreover, the difficulty we have in abandoning desires we just cannot satisfy is sometimes overwhelming even when they are not involuntary. The desire for sight is not wired in, unlike the desire to avoid pain; those who are born blind and always convinced that the condition is irreversible may never develop any serious desire to see. To do so would cause them needless suffering and would be irrational. But I strongly doubt that blind people who were able to see for most of their lives will ever cease to crave sight. They will always deeply resent their sightless condition. After all, so much of what they value depended on their being able to see, and only if they can completely overhaul their values can they become reconciled to their fate. Of course, the rational thing for them to do is to overhaul their desires, but it is nonetheless tragic that they should have to resort to modification, and the fact that modification is the rational course of action does not mean they can pursue it, or even that they will want to try.

People who are considering whether or not to become neo-Epicureans are in a position in many ways analogous to that of the newly blind. The main difference is that whereas the blind are missing out on something of which most normal human beings are capable, it has never been possible for any human being to live much more than a normal lifetime. The dying are going through something no one has ever been able to escape and which no one may ever be able to escape. In view of the inevitability of death, there can be no question that the rational course is to give up aspirations that we can accomplish only if we live more than a normal lifetime, but it is still tragic that we should have to let these hopes go, tragic that we should have to deal with the misfortune of death by abandoning things we care about. If we nonetheless manage to do so, or better yet, if we can manage to avoid ever forming aspirations that death is certain to defeat, then we will be a good deal happier. And it is likely that the task of adjusting our desires will become considerably easier if we take seriously the fact that in wishing to do what cannot be accomplished within the confines of a maximally extended lifetime we are trying to attain the impossible. It is conceivable that research will yield life extension techniques; that would call for a readjustment of

the plans we make for our lives. But to plan our lives on the assumption that such techniques will be forthcoming would only result in bitter disappointment.

Abandoning desires that cannot be satisfied within the span of a normal lifetime is something we can accomplish only to the extent that we have not already allowed what is dear to us depend on the impossible being possible. If we have, we face the task of inventing for ourselves a new plan of life that can be realized within the more narrow confines of a normal lifetime, a task that may well prove to be too much for us. It will be those who were reared with the promise of immortality always before them that will suffer most when they become convinced of their mortality. A good deal of anguish is in store for them unless they never really took that promise so seriously as to let anything dear to them depend on immortality.

Many will find the task of epicureanizing their desires difficult. But some parts of that task are easy to accomplish. Ensuring our own dispensability, for example, is a good deal easier than we perhaps would like to believe. It is rare indeed that people's lives are shattered irretrievably when their parents die, especially when their parents have lived a complete lifetime. It is even more rare that world affairs turn on whether or not particular individuals survive beyond a normal lifetime. For the most part, people are already dispensable; becoming so takes no effort at all. If we are indispensable, it is likely to be because we have developed strong ties to a small number of people in whose lives we play a very important role. It is likely to be because we are united with friends (including those we love) in mutually rewarding activities and our friends value the fact that it is we who are taking part in those activities with them.<sup>16</sup>

Even if we succeed in epicureanizing our desires and living long enough to see our projects through, we must still face the usual concomitants of dying: pain and physical breakdown. While it is not accurate to say that dying is a bad thing for us because of the pain and physical decline that lead up to it, this pain and decline certainly are bad things, and even those of us who manage to hold our withering bodies together long enough to achieve what passes as 'old age' can rarely hope to avoid suffering terribly before we die.

Still, there is an obvious strategy for minimizing the agony that precedes dying. Supposing that we truly have accomplished our projects on schedule, then instead of waiting for nature to decide the course of events leading up to our death, we are better off taking our fates into our own hands. In many cases, painless suicide will be the best course. But planning for ourselves a painless suicide will require that we make the truly agonizing decision that our ventures are at an end, and further living would not be worthwhile. Making this decision could be the worst experience we will ever undergo. But we may not be so lucky. What we would experience if we did not make it is likely to be worse.

## **V. Summary**

We should not be indifferent about dying, any more that we should be indifferent about other misfortunes that will befall us. And a misfortune dying assuredly is for those of us whose endeavors make living a good thing. For dying prevents us from engaging further in those endeavors which we find so rewarding.

Nor should we want to be indifferent about dying, in view of what we would have to become in order to be indifferent to death whenever it may come. What we would have to do is to renounce the many ties, concerns and projects that make us life-affirmers. No longer could we pursue any fulfilling desire that would be thwarted if we were to die. But it is precisely these goals whose satisfaction makes life worth living. These are the ones that give us a reason to think that living is good. Any aspiration capable of motivating us to live is one we can achieve only if we are

alive; inevitably, then, any such hope would be frustrated by our deaths. In the end, then, to become indifferent to death, to adopt a death-tolerant personality, requires that we give up all desires that give us reason to live. It requires that we become indifferent to life. But we are better off thinking that dying is bad than thinking that living cannot be good.

If we are doomed to undergo the misfortune of dying, we can at least make our destiny as tolerable as possible. We can allow ourselves to live life passionately, but according to a plan whereby everything we propose to do can be accomplished within the span of a normal lifetime. Concerns which transcend those limits we should occasionally allow ourselves as well, but only if we plan to render them invulnerable to our deaths. If we succeed in molding the scheme of our desires in this way, and if we die only after accomplishing what we have set out to do, then for us dying will not be such a bad thing. Whether we can say that it will not be a bad thing at all depends on what we think we could do with more time than is granted us.

#### END NOTES

Susann Luper-Foy, Curtis Brown and the editors of *The Philosophical Quarterly* provided me with many important suggestions and criticisms; I want to thank them for their help.

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<sup>1</sup> Unamuno is the only person I know of who would insist that there is nothing worse than dying: And I must confess, painful though the confession be, that in the days of the simple faith of my childhood, descriptions of the tortures of hell, however terrible, never made me tremble, for I always felt that nothingness was much more terrifying. ...It is better to live in pain than to cease to be in peace. (*Tragic Sense of Life*, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1954, pp. 43-44).

I find his adamancy refreshing.

<sup>2</sup> Bernard Williams presses this point in "The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality," in *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

<sup>3</sup> Michel de Montaigne gathers a marvelous collection of inanities in "That to Philosophize is to Learn to Die," *The Complete Works of Montaigne*, trans. D. Frame (Stanford University Press, 1943).

<sup>4</sup> Letter to Menoecus, J. Saunders, ed., *Greek and Roman Philosophy after Aristotle*, The Free Press, New York: 1966.

<sup>5</sup> This suggestion is due to Thomas Nagel, "Death," in *Moral Problems*, ed. by J. Rachels (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), pp. 361-70).

<sup>6</sup>Or alternatively,

If I (now) believed that X were the case at a given time t, then I would (now) want to be dead at t. These two possible formulations of escape desires differ in that the first (given in the body of the paper) characterizes escape desires in terms of the form of their contents, while the second (given above) characterizes them in terms of the conditions under which we will have them. Both, however, rely on subjunctive conditionals.

<sup>7</sup> According to Epicurus,

All good and evil consists in sensation, but death is deprivation of sensation. . . .For we recognize pleasure as the first good innate in us, and from pleasure we begin every act of choice and avoidance, and to pleasure we return again, using the feeling as the standard by which we judge every good. Letter to Menoecus, op. cit.

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<sup>8</sup> Galileo Galilei is reported by Unamuno (op. cit.) to have remarked that some perhaps will say that the bitterest pain is the loss of life, but I say there are others more bitter; for whosoever is deprived of life is deprived at the same time of the power to lament, not only this, but any other loss whatsoever.

<sup>9</sup> Below I point out that even hedonism cannot help avoid a very unappealing callousness. I might note that there is another reason, often attributed to Epicurus, for denying that dying can be a bad thing for us. The objection is that 'having died' can never correctly be attributed to anyone, since before people die, 'having died' is not true of them, and after they die they have ceased to exist, so that nothing remains for 'having died' to be a property of. Hence 'having died' does not refer to a property anyone can have, and so it cannot be a misfortune for us to have that property. (Arguably, this is what Wittgenstein had in mind when he remarked in his *Tractatus*, 6.4311 that "death is not an event in life.")

But this is a mere sophism. Just as I can have properties by virtue of what goes on outside my spatial boundaries (for example, being attacked by a cat), so I can have properties by virtue of what is going on outside my temporal boundaries. Thus it is partly due to events that occurred before I came into existence that 'having been conceived' and 'born after Aristotle' are both true of me. And it is partly due to events that will take place after I die that 'will have his will read' and 'will die' are true of me. Death is not an event in a life, but it is the event by which a life ends.

<sup>10</sup> Alternatively:

If I (now) believed that I would be alive at *t*, then I would (now) want *X* to be the case at *t*.

Notice that the contents of conditional desires are the contrapositives of escape desires. Contrapositives of subjunctive conditionals are not equivalent to each other, however. (For an explanation, see David Lewis' discussion in *Counterfactuals* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), p. 35.)

<sup>11</sup> This view has been advocated in one form or another by a great number of people for a good while. It is the third 'Noble Truth' of Gautama Siddhartha (563-483 B.C.), and is echoed in the following melancholy advice by the tenth century Buddhist lama Milarepa:

All worldly pursuits have but the one unavoidable and inevitable end, which is sorrow: acquisitions end in dispersion; buildings, in destruction; meetings, in separation; births, in death. Knowing this, one should from the very first renounce acquisition and heaping-up, and building and meeting. . . . Life is short, and the time of death is uncertain. (From W. Evans-Wentz, *Tibet's Great Yogi: Milarepa* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1969).)

The Roman stoic Epictetus (ca. 50-130 A.D.), who lived about three centuries after Epicurus, also suggests that we alter our desires so that we need not regard the inevitable as a bad thing:

Ask not that events should happen as you will, but let your will be that events should happen as they do, and you shall have peace.

If . . . you try to avoid only what is unnatural in the region within your control, you will escape from all that you avoid; but if you try to avoid disease or death or poverty you will be miserable. (From *The Manual of Epictetus*, in *The Stoic and Epicurean Philosophers*, edited by W. Oates (New York: Random House, Inc., 1940), pp. 468-484.)

<sup>12</sup> Indeed, we might just as well call the Epicurean personality death-wishing in view of the facts that conditional desires are much like escape desires and the latter are qualified death wishes.

<sup>13</sup> Bernard Williams says this rather casually in "The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality," op. cit.

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<sup>14</sup> *My Confessions*, trans. Leo Weiner (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1905), Tolstoy seems to suggest that life would be meaningless if we died:

But the answer in this sphere of knowledge to my question what the meaning of my life was, was always: "you are what you call your life; you are a temporal, accidental conglomeration of particles. The inter-relation, the change of these particles, produces in you that which you call life. This congeries will last for some time; then the interaction of these particles will cease, and that which you call life and all your questions will come to an end."

With such an answer it appears that the answer is not a reply to the question. I want to know the meaning of my life, but the fact that it is a particle of the infinite not only gives it no meaning, but even destroys every possible meaning.

<sup>15</sup> For a description of the (primitive) status of research into life extension, see R. Parker and H. Gerjuoy, "Life-Span Extension: The State of the Art," *Life Span*, ed. R. Veatch (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), pp. 1-27.

<sup>16</sup> For an elaboration of the notion of friendship, see my paper "Competing for the Good Life," *The American Philosophical Quarterly* 23 (1986), pp. 167-177.