

Existential Terror

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Suppose there is no afterlife. When you entertain the possibility that at some point in the future you will cease to exist altogether, you may be filled with dread or horror. You won't exist and you'll never come back; perhaps you'll be remembered for a while by your loved ones, though they will be busy with their own concerns, and in any case the same thing will happen to them too. If you're very lucky you might do something that will cause you to be remembered or even admired by people in the distant future, but most likely you will be like the vast majority of the humans who have ever existed: at some point after you die, probably not long after, you will be utterly forgotten; it will be as if you never existed at all. And even if you aren't immediately forgotten, you won't be there to appreciate the fact that you are remembered. And of course to top it all off, one day there will be no sentient life at all and no memories or trace of humanity - just a cold, lifeless universe.

Reflecting on these facts can be terrifying for many people. But others, in conversation, report never having experienced such terror even though they hold the same beliefs about what will eventually happen to them and to the universe. (Unamuno describes such people as "monsters" (Unamuno 1972, 46).) Are the terror-free more or less rational than the terror-stricken, and why? I will examine several proposed answers.

Let me clarify what I mean by "rational" here. I am not investigating a practical question about whether you will be better off if you are terrified of nonexistence. (I'm pretty sure you won't be better off, because it is no fun to be terrified; but anything is possible.) I am also not investigating whether you are blameworthy for feeling existential terror, or for not feeling it if you don't. Maybe there is no way to avoid some feelings of existential terror and so you can't be blamed for it. The question I am asking here is whether feelings of existential terror are fitting or appropriate feelings to have when contemplating future nonexistence. Of course, this assumes that feelings or emotions are the sorts of things that can be correct or incorrect, appropriate or inappropriate; they are not "bare feels," but have enough cognitive content to be rationally assessable.

Finally, here are some clarificatory remarks about the relationship between existential terror and fear. I believe there is a particular feeling, or perhaps a class of feelings, that many of us have when contemplating future nonexistence. It is, I think, the same feeling many of us have when contemplating the future nonexistence of all of humanity: a kind of hopeless dread or emptiness or intense angst. Other fears are not very much like this fear. If you are on a plane with snakes and you are afraid of the snakes, the feeling you have is an entirely different kind of feeling, not very closely related to existential terror except insofar as both are negative attitudes. It is common to say that the appropriate object of fear is something *dangerous* (Davis 1987, 300). This applies well to snakes on a plane but not so well to nonexistence. It would be glib and unsatisfying to argue as follows: "Terror is a kind of fear. But fear can only be appropriately

directed at something dangerous. Nonexistence is not dangerous. Therefore existential terror is inappropriate.” One can reply either (i) that the stipulation that fear is appropriately directed only at things that are dangerous is incorrect, and that in fact existential terror is a counterexample to this assertion, or (ii) that if fear is really to be understood so narrowly, then existential terror is not a kind of fear, or perhaps (iii) that we should understand “danger” more broadly so that nonexistence really is dangerous. It strikes me as not very important which route we take. Relatedly, some have claimed that when one fears that P, one is uncertain whether P or not-P (Gordon 1980, 561; Davis 1987, 290). But it seems that one may be certain that one will cease to exist, and in fact this certainty may only add to the existential terror. It would be wrong to conclude that there is some sort of conceptual confusion in the notion of existential terror. Either it is a mistake to think that fear requires uncertainty, or else existential terror is not a kind of fear at all.

1. The deprivation account

Some of our attitudes about death might be justified by death’s effects on the well-being of its victim. According to the deprivation account of death’s badness, death is bad in virtue of depriving its victim of a life higher in total well-being. According to this view, in cases where death deprives the victim of a lot of well-being, for example when the victim is very young, death is very bad for its victim; in cases where the victim is very old, it may still be bad but not nearly as bad as for the young. In cases where death deprives the victim of a terrible future, death would be good for the one who dies.

Suppose that negative attitudes are correctly directed at things that are bad for you.¹ Then some negative attitude would be justified concerning death in many or most cases. A stronger negative attitude would be justified when the death occurs at a young age than when it occurs late in life. When death is a benefit, a positive attitude towards it would be warranted. Which attitudes are appropriate? On this account, death is treated like other deprivors of well-being, like oversleeping and missing a baseball game. An appropriate attitude to have towards a deprivation of well-being might be sadness or disappointment.

But terror and dread do not seem like appropriate responses to mere deprivations of well-being (Draper 2012). You might reply that death is no ordinary deprivation. It doesn’t just deprive you of a baseball game. It deprives you of all baseball games and everything else you enjoy in life. So the size of the deprivation might be so large that terror would be justified. But I don’t think this explains the terror. It is not as if younger people experience existential terror more severely than older people, as one would expect if the amount of deprived well-being were

¹ We may wish to make a distinction between objective and subjective criteria for correctness of attitudes. An attitude might be in one way correct or justified if it is based on appropriate evidence, even if it does not fit its object; if something is justifiably believed to be bad but in fact is not bad, then according to a subjective criterion for correctness, it would be correct to have a negative attitude towards that thing. I am presupposing an objective sense of correctness according to which one can have an incorrect attitude towards something even if the attitude is justified by one’s evidence.

what justified the reaction. And furthermore even those who reasonably expect their future life to be full of misery may experience the same existential terror as everyone else; “unhappy consciousness flees its own annihilation” (Unamuno 1972, 46).

It will be useful to distinguish at least two things that attitudes towards death might be directed at. On the one hand, there is what I’ll call premature death – death that takes place at a certain time *rather than at some later time*. The deprivation theorist says that the extent of a particular death’s badness depends on what would have happened had that death not occurred, and hence had the victim lived longer. Premature death is generally much worse for the young than for the old because it generally deprives the victim of more of a good life. So attitudes towards premature death should be expected to vary based on age, if those attitudes are appropriate. On the other hand, there is the fact that we die at all, *rather than living eternally*. Existential terror is directed at this fact – at our *mortality* – not at premature death.

The deprivation account seems well-suited to explain the rationality of negative attitudes towards premature death.² But it does not seem as well-suited to explain the rationality of negative attitudes towards mortality. To assess the value of mortality for someone, we would compare how things actually go for that person to how they would have gone if that person were immortal. But in most contexts there is no fact of the matter about how things would have gone for you if you were immortal. This is not an epistemological issue: it is not that we just don’t know how things would go if we were not mortal. Nor is it a denial of determinism; it is not that there are no facts about how things *will* go in the future. Even if the future is fixed, facts about how things will go are insufficient to fix how things *would* go if something were different. Rather, the problem is that there are just too many ways we *might* be immortal, and no reason to think one of those ways is the way we *would* be immortal if we were to be immortal. Given some additional context, there might be such a fact. If a truthful deity told you, “I will give you an immortal life with characteristics X, Y and Z, if you push this button,” and you were deciding whether to push the button, then there would be a fact of the matter about what would happen if you were immortal. But nobody is in such a situation. So there is no fact of the matter about how good or bad your mortality is for you, given the deprivation account. It will therefore not be promising to explain the rationality of existential terror by appealing to the deprivational disvalue of mortality, because terror does not seem appropriately directed at something of indeterminate value.

2. The desire to continue existing

Samuel Scheffler agrees that the deprivation approach does not fully account for our attitudes towards death (Scheffler 2013, 102). He describes existential terror as follows: “Although I have had the experience before of losing things that mattered to me or of having things end, it is *I* who have had those experiences... But I take death to mean that the very *I* that has had those experiences is what is now going to end... And this induces, or can induce, panic.

² But see Bradley 2015 and Draper 2012 for difficulties.

It can seem completely incomprehensible and terrifying, even impossible” (86). This is so far just a description of the circumstances under which existential terror arises. Is this feeling justified? Scheffler thinks it is, on the following grounds: “If fear is paradigmatically a response to a perceived threat or danger, and if it is not unreasonable to perceive the unwanted cessation of one’s existence as a threat, then the fear of death is not (or at any rate need not be) unreasonable” (Scheffler 2013, 103).

This will not get us very far in justifying existential terror unless we can justify the thought that unwanted cessation of existence is a threat. What makes it a threat? We discussed one way in which it is a threat in the previous section; but that proved insufficient. Perhaps we should focus on the thought that the cessation of existence is “unwanted.” But this will not get us very far. The prospect of having a desire frustrated, even an important desire, does not seem worthy of terror. Disappointment or sadness might be rational, but terror does not seem to be. So while getting something you don’t want might warrant some negative attitude, more would need to be said to explain why existential terror is warranted towards future nonexistence.

Here is another way to see why Scheffler has not solved the problem. The desire to continue living can itself be rational or irrational. It seems rational in just those cases where continued life would be a good thing. (Or perhaps in cases where it is rational to believe that continued life would be good.) But then the explanation of why terror would be justified need not proceed via the intermediate step of desire. It can proceed by appeal directly to the loss of the good things in life (or of things it is rational to believe are good). But this is just the deprivation account again, and we have already seen that the deprivation account does not explain the rationality of terror. Scheffler has not advanced our quest.

3. The Extinction Factor

Frances Kamm explains existential terror by appeal to what she calls the “Extinction Factor”: “The Extinction Factor is that death ends permanently all significant periods of a person’s life; there is no more possibility of significant periods of life... I believe that the end of all possibilities of life for us, in the order of time’s passage, more than insult or deprivation, awakens terror in us” (Kamm 1993, 64). If we were moved by the Extinction Factor, we would prefer to delay, for as long as possible, the goods of life being all over for us, even if this delay would not result in any increase in the amount of good our lives contained.

Kamm’s view is that the Extinction Factor explains, but does not justify, existential terror. “Given that total goods remain constant, someone who cares for the goods should, I think, want them sooner rather than later... This is because, if we put them off, we are resisting the pull of the good, even if we will eventually get these goods anyway. But the good should be *irresistible*” (Kamm 1993, 59). I do not find Kamm’s reasoning here convincing. From the fact that you should not resist the good, it does not follow that you should want the good *right now*. Preferring goods to be in the more distant future rather than the nearer future is not irrational in the way that preferring not to have them at all would be irrational. Nevertheless Kamm’s

conclusion seems correct; the Extinction Factor hardly seems adequate as a justification for existential terror. For if we are holding the amount of goods in your life fixed, even if you prefer to have the goods as late as possible, you probably don't care *that much* about when you get them, such that you would be *terrified* to get the last of them too early.

The problem common to all of the attempts canvassed so far is that while they may identify some negative attitude that would be appropriate to have towards death, none justifies existential terror in particular. In the next section I will discuss an attempt that does not have that defect.

4. Meaninglessness

Miguel de Unamuno says, "If I am to die altogether, then nothing makes any sense" (1972, 38); "If we are all to die altogether—what is the point of everything!" (1972, 48). Amélie Rorty elaborates on this thought, describing what I take to be existential terror and offering an explanation of it, in the following passage:

Some fear that the world will go on without their being there to experience it, to comment on it, to understand and explain it, to joke about it, and to attempt to improve it by their own lights, even when they despair of doing so. The drama will continue without their participation and perhaps none the worse for that. What turns such sorrow into fear is the thought that all our efforts to live well, our attentions and dedications were for nothing, that our joys and generousities, pains and stoic resolutions were all in vain. We may fear that the balance of our lives was wrong: the fear is a terror that death shows our significant projects were meaningless, that our lives were idle and pointless, our enterprises arbitrary. (Rorty 1994, 104)

Rorty does not endorse or criticize this account of existential terror but it seems to me to be the most plausible and natural justification of existential terror. I think it explains the features identified by both Scheffler and Kamm. It is, in large part at least, because going out of existence *renders existence meaningless* – and in particular, renders our activities and projects meaningless – that we have a desire not to die, as Scheffler says, and that we fear the end of the possibility of more goods in life, as Kamm says.

In addition to rendering life meaningless, we might think that mortality is an affront to our dignity. The fact that the universe will kill us in the end, no matter what we do, shows that the universe does not respect our dignity as agents. Imagine an omnipotent and utterly callous judge whom all those accused of crimes must face. No matter what they say to this judge, and no matter whether they are innocent or guilty, he sentences everyone to the same fate: death. Such a judge does not respect the accused. How undignified it would be to plead one's case before such a judge! The universe treats all of us like that judge treats the accused. These points may be

connected: human dignity is possible only when our activities have a point. Robbing our lives of meaning thereby robs us of dignity.³

To explain why I find this a natural explanation, here are two autobiographical examples. First example: my wife put a refrigerator magnet on our refrigerator containing the following apparently well-known quotation attributed to someone named Forest E. Witcraft: “One hundred years from now, It will not matter what kind of car I drove, What kind of house I lived in, Or how much money I had in the bank, But the world may be a better place because I made a difference in a child's life.” My thought upon reading this was: a few hundred years after that, *none* of those things will matter because that child will no longer exist. We are correct to value making the world better for children more highly than making money or having a certain car, but we should not think that this correctness has anything to do with what matters in the distant future; at some more distant future point, in all likelihood, nothing you will have done will matter. Reflecting on this magnet sometimes causes a bit of existential dread in me.

Second example: History is full of stories about people dying horrible premature deaths. When I read about these deaths, I sometimes feel bad for those people. But other times I think: even if this poor person had not died in that way, they would have died of something else hundreds of years ago, just like everyone else in that historical period. Then sometimes I think: we are all relevantly like that person. We must now realize that in the future, Keith Richards will look back on how the rest of us died and say that it doesn't matter how we died, since we would have died from some other cause long ago anyway. Realizing this sometimes makes me angsty.

The common thought here is that future nonexistence threatens us with *not mattering*, that is, with having a meaningless or pointless existence. Saying that a person had a meaningless life is very different from saying that she had a life devoid of well-being.⁴ These are different kinds of evaluation. Someone could have a life full of well-being but devoid of meaning; an example might be someone who enjoys a lot of pleasure but accomplishes nothing. The pleasure still has a kind of value. But the prospect of more pleasure does not provide any relief from existential terror as long as it is followed by nonexistence.

Suppose I am right that existential terror is, at least in part, a response to a perceived meaninglessness of existence. Two questions remain: is existence truly rendered meaningless by its finitude, and if so, is terror an appropriate response to meaninglessness? Concerning the second question, others have argued that we should take a defiant (Camus) or ironic (Nagel) attitude towards the meaninglessness of life (Nagel 1979, 20-23). Such attitudes seem justified more by their effects than by their fittingness to their object. Even if they are fitting, it is possible that there is not just one attitude that would be appropriate, so terror could still be justified. But if existence is not rendered meaningless by its finitude, none of these attitudes would be warranted, at least on these grounds. So I now turn to that question. I think there is no good reason to think mortality is inconsistent with a meaningful existence.

³ See Nagel's discussion of Camus (Nagel 1979, 22).

⁴ Some argue that the two evaluations are related: that, for example, if your life is meaningful then it at least has a component of positive well-being. Nevertheless they are distinct modes of evaluation.

First, what makes it the case that a life has no meaning, or does not matter? There are three types of theory of meaningfulness.⁵ (1) According to supernaturalists, meaning is conferred on our lives by a deity. According to such views, if there is no deity, there is no way for lives to be meaningful. But if supernaturalism is true, then future nonexistence is not particularly relevant to the explanation of the lack of meaning in our lives. The meaninglessness is fully explained by the absence of a deity. Even if we existed forever, our lives would be meaningless without a deity. So we can set supernaturalism aside. (2) According to subjectivists, meaningfulness is determined by the subjective states of the individual; as Richard Taylor says, “the meaning of life is from within us” (Taylor 2008, 142). Subjectivist views about meaning will be immune to worries about future nonexistence, since one could render life meaningful by not caring about the distant future. (3) A more popular view is that meaningfulness is at least partly an objective matter, and in particular that participating in valuable activities or pursuing valuable goals is crucial to meaning (Wolf 2010). This is the sort of view most worth discussing here, because it is due to the alleged effect of future nonexistence on the import of our activities and projects that existential terror might be fitting. We can make a further distinction between external and internal meaning (Wielenberg 2005, 14-15). A life has external meaning if it makes a positive difference to how things go in the world. For example, a life devoted to helping others might be high in external meaning. A life has internal meaning if it is a kind of life that contains activities that are worthwhile *for the subject* of the life. As Erik Wielenberg puts it, they are the sorts of activities one thinks of doing when one thinks, “I want to *do* something with my life” (Wielenberg 2005, 15) – as contrasted with activities that may be beneficial to the agent but also seem otherwise pointless, like playing enjoyable but mindless games. These two sorts of meaning may be related; having a life high in external meaning may result in a life high in internal meaning. Existential terror might be tied to meaninglessness in either of these forms.

If an objective theory of meaning is true, does future nonexistence threaten the meaningfulness of our lives? To answer this question, let us begin by distinguishing between a life being meaningless *simpliciter* and a life being meaningless at a time (Nagel 1979, 11). It may be that my current activities will make no difference to how things are a million years from now; we may conclude that *at that future time* it does not matter what I did. But we are not entitled to conclude, from the fact that *there is a time at which* it does not matter what I did, that it does not matter *simpliciter* what I did. At least, this would be a substantial claim requiring argument. An argument might be put forth in either direction: (i) there is a time at which nothing I do matters, so nothing I do matters *simpliciter*; (ii) there is a time at which something I do matters, so something I do matters *simpliciter*. I know of no reason to think that (i) is a better argument than (ii). But (ii) has something to be said for it that (i) does not. Consider a related pair of arguments about well-being: (iii) there is a time at which I have no well-being level, so my life has no well-being; (iv) there is a time at which I do have a well-being level, so my life does have some well-being. While (iii) is a terrible argument that nobody would ever endorse, (iv) is very plausible. How well a whole life goes is in some way affected by how it goes at times within it. Perhaps

⁵ See Metz 2013 for a thorough overview of theories of meaningfulness.

meaningfulness works in a similar way: how meaningful a life is depends, at least in part, on the meaningfulness of the episodes it contains. Objective meaning seems to work in this way. If a life contains some meaningful times – times when the subject is engaged in meaningful activities – then the life is to some extent meaningful, even if there are future times at which it is not meaningful.

It is possible, though, that future nonexistence retroactively renders particular episodes in one's life meaningless, by robbing our activities of objective value. This would be the case if it were necessary, in order for an activity to have value, that it make a *permanent* positive impact on the world. While we can make a fleeting impact on the world, we can have no effect on how things turn out in the end. Curing cancer has no more effect than playing video games on how things will be in a billion years; there will be no value at that time no matter what we do.

But this by itself is not a convincing reason to think that our current activities are meaningless. The implication is that if the world might have value at the end of time (whenever that is supposed to be) in virtue of our activities, then our activities *could* be significant. But why think that the value of the world at the end of time is so much more important than the value of the world now, or in the near future, in evaluating our activities? (Edwards 2008, 122; Wielenberg 2005, 30)

5. Debunking terror

So we have no reason to think that our lives are rendered meaningless by their finitude. Why would we think this? Notice that the finitude that allegedly renders life meaningless is finitude in one direction only: the future. Contemplating a *past* where you do not exist is not terrifying. It can be fascinating to think about what the universe was like at distant past times. It is a *future* without you that causes terror. In order to justify the claim that future nonexistence renders life meaningless, we will inevitably have to appeal to an asymmetry between past and future nonexistence, or a bias toward the future (Parfit 1984, Ch. 8). We already know that we have this bias when it comes to certain things other than nonexistence. For example, we prefer good experiences to be future rather than past, and bad experiences to be past rather than future. Whether this bias is rational is an open question. Perhaps it can be justified on prudential grounds; and perhaps we are blameless for having it because it is unavoidable; but what makes it *fitting* to be more concerned about future experiences than past ones? I know of no convincing arguments that it is fitting, and there are some interesting recent arguments that it is irrational (see e.g. Dougherty 2011 and Greene and Sullivan 2015).

The suggestion here is that our thoughts about nonexistence are subject to a similar sort of bias: as with pain, we prefer nonexistence in our past rather than in our future. And surely *this* bias will be even *more* difficult to justify. After all, unlike pain, nonexistence is not intrinsically bad for us. So why should we care whether it is past or future?

I hypothesize that it is existential terror that concerned Lucretius when he formulated the symmetry argument: since there is nothing about past nonexistence that is worthy of fear, there is

nothing about future nonexistence worthy of fear (Lucretius 1965, 110). This argument likely fails if it is supposed to justify *total indifference* towards future nonexistence.⁶ A deprivation theorist can say that we should not be indifferent to deprivations of goods in either the past or the future: some negative attitude is justified towards any such deprivation no matter when it occurs. But recall that this does not justify existential terror, only some other negative reaction such as sadness or disappointment. Existential terror is not directed at a deprivation of goods. It is directed at nonexistence itself. Lucretius reminds us that nonexistence is not, *in itself*, worthy of terror. Given (i) the failures of attempts to justify the claim that future nonexistence renders life meaningless, (ii) the failures of other attempts to explain existential terror, and (iii) the availability of a plausible debunking explanation for terror at future nonexistence, I conclude that Lucretius's symmetry argument, interpreted narrowly as being about existential terror, was sound. Existential terror is irrational.

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⁶ See Draper 2012, 310-312, for a recent discussion of the relevance of Lucretian arguments to emotional responses to death.

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