

How Should We Feel About Death?¹

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What are the rational constraints on our desires and emotions concerning death? We might rephrase the question in terms of appropriateness or fittingness: what attitudes or emotions is it appropriate or fitting to have concerning death? This question should be distinguished from two other questions we might ask about attitudes towards death. First, there is a question about prudence: what attitudes towards death would make us best off? It might be that it is imprudent to fear death, or to have any other negative attitude or emotion about death, because experiencing fear, worry, horror or aversion is unpleasant. Perhaps you would be better advised not to think about death at all. Probably some negative attitudes towards death help us avoid it and therefore benefit us. I will not be taking up these questions about prudence. Even if a certain attitude towards death would be imprudent, it might still be fitting to its object. Second, there is a question about blameworthiness: what attitudes towards death are such that we should be blamed or praised if we have them? This question raises difficult issues about control. Perhaps we do not have enough control over our attitudes towards death to be blamed or praised for having them. Even if one cannot be blamed for fearing death, it might be that it is inappropriate to fear death. I am interested solely in the question of the appropriateness of attitudes towards death.

I will assume that there is no afterlife, and that when a person dies she goes out of existence. If there were an afterlife, then the question of how to feel about death would mainly be

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determined by what that afterlife is like, and the question would be philosophically less interesting. Thus the question might be rephrased as: how should we feel about being permanently annihilated? For those who are certain there is an afterlife, this question will be merely of theoretical interest, but those who think annihilation is even a possibility should be interested in this question.

1. A Simple Story

A good way to start thinking about how we should feel about death would be by figuring out whether death is bad for us and why. Most philosophers who have thought about these questions have said that death is generally bad for us, and that what makes it bad is that it deprives the victim of more of a good life.² We might go on to say something about degrees: how bad death is depends on how much of a good life it deprives its victim from having. Deprivation is a counterfactual notion: what death deprives a victim from having is what *would have happened* to the victim if she hadn't died. Given optimistic assumptions about the quality of human life, death is therefore normally bad for people, and it is often one of the worst things that can happen to someone. On this picture death is *instrumentally* bad for a person, not intrinsically bad for her. Death is bad for someone because of its results, not in itself.

The deprivation account seems like it must be basically right. Some have argued for some bells and whistles to be added. For example, Jeff McMahan claims that the badness of death should be discounted based on, among other things, (1) the extent of the psychological relations that would have held between the person at the time of death and the person at the times she

² See Nagel 1979, Feldman 1992, Broome 1999, Bradley 2009, and many others.

would have been getting the good things death deprived her from getting (the “time-relative interests account”), and (2) the extent to which the victim previously enjoyed a good life (McMahan 2002). For our purposes, we can ignore these bells and whistles.

How should we feel about death? This seems pretty simple too. According to “fitting attitude” analyses of value, to be good just is, roughly, to be the fitting object of pro-attitudes, and to be bad just is to be the fitting object of con-attitudes. Given the deprivation account of the badness of death along with our optimistic assumption, it follows that death is, typically, a fitting object of a negative attitude. Of course, fitting attitude analyses of value are controversial. I don’t wish to defend such analyses. But even if value cannot be *analyzed* in this way, a weaker claim may still be true: necessarily, if something is bad then it is the fitting object of a negative attitude. Given the deprivation account and the optimistic assumption, this entails that death merits a negative attitude.

There is one way in which a negative attitude towards death is not warranted. If we want to know how we should feel about death *in itself*, it seems that we should be indifferent towards it. After all, nothing good or bad will happen to you while you are dead. There should be a difference between our intrinsic attitudes towards death and our overall attitudes. The attitudes that are *intrinsically* fitting to have towards death are the attitudes it would be appropriate to have towards death *considered by itself*, independent of what else death brings about or prevents. Thus there are two correct attitudes to have towards death in cases where continued life would be good: intrinsic indifference, but an overall negative attitude in virtue of death’s effects.

2. Complications

But things are not so simple. One complication is that there are a lot of negative attitudes one might have about death: fear, dread, worry, hatred, and many more. Someone might think that some negative attitude towards death is rational, but that fear in particular might not be. Samuel Scheffler seems to think that this is the main problem for the simple story I just told (2013, 87; also see Draper 1999). I am not gripped by this problem. If it turns out that, say, dread is warranted but fear isn't, is this important? I find it difficult to distinguish these emotions from each other anyway, so I just can't get too excited about which one is appropriate, unless perhaps one is felt more intensely than the other (I return to this in Section 6). The problem I am primarily worried about is what we might call the *problem of multiplicity of comparisons*.

Suppose a young and healthy man named Jim steps in front of a bus and is severely injured; he quickly succumbs to his injuries. Is Jim's death bad for him? It seems plausible to say that it is. But it might also seem plausible to say that if Jim hadn't died when he did, he would have instead experienced a great amount of pain and suffering from being hit by the bus. So each of the following might be an appropriate account of what happened:

Jim got hit by a bus and died. What a shame! He was so young. If Jim hadn't died, he would have lived a long and healthy life.

Given that Jim got hit by a bus, it's probably better that he died. If he hadn't, he would have been severely injured instead. He wouldn't have wanted to live that way.

The first account contains the counterfactual "If Jim hadn't died, he would have lived a long and healthy life." The second implies the counterfactual "If Jim hadn't died he would have been

severely injured.” Can both of these be true, given that they are incompatible? Yes, because counterfactuals are vague (Lewis 1973, Ch. 1). This vagueness gets resolved in different ways given conversational context; context helps determine which aspects of the actual situation we hold fixed when considering what would have happened if something hadn’t happened. In this case, which counterfactual is true depends on whether or not we are holding fixed that Jim gets hit by the bus. Holding fixed that he gets hit, the second counterfactual seems true; otherwise the first seems true. Given the truth of the first counterfactual, Jim’s death is very bad for him. Given the truth of the second counterfactual, his death is not bad for him. Yet neither counterfactual seems to have any kind of *privileged status*. When considering what would have happened if Jim hadn’t died, there is no reason to think that it is particularly appropriate or inappropriate to hold fixed whether Jim is hit by the bus.

The preceding thoughts about counterfactuals are by themselves boring and unoriginal. But when applied to death they are surprising. You might have thought that there is some absolute fact of the matter about whether someone’s death is bad for her, but it seems there is not.

We might say that Jim’s death is bad relative to context C1 but not bad relative to context C2. But this is misleading because it suggests that there is some monadic property that death sometimes has and sometimes lacks depending on what we are thinking about. Despite grammatical appearances, instrumental badness is not a monadic property. Attributions of instrumental value are fundamentally *contrastive*.³ What is bad for Jim is *dying rather than not being hit by the bus at all*. What is not bad for Jim is *dying rather than being severely injured*. There is no absolute fact of the matter about whether Jim’s death, full stop, is bad for him, even

³ For another example of a contrastive view, see Schaffer 2005 and Hitchcock 1996 on contrastive causation.

though context can make an assertion of “Jim’s death was bad for him” true. Context makes a particular contrast, or class of contrasts, salient. Thus when we utter a sentence like “Jim’s death was bad for him,” the reason we speak truly is that what we say is to be understood as expressing the thought that *Jim’s dying rather than not being hit by the bus* was bad for him – and this is just a way of saying that it was worse for Jim to die than not to be hit by a bus. (Compare with tallness: there is no such thing as absolute tallness. One is tall relative to a contrast class; context provides a relevant class that determines the truth-value of an attribution of tallness. To say that someone is tall is to say she is taller than people in the contrast class. Instrumental badness is like tallness in this way.)

John Broome puts the point in this way: “All the significant facts have been fully stated once we have said what dying at eighty-two is better than and what it is worse than. There is no further significant question whether or not dying at eighty-two is an absolutely bad thing.” (Broome 1999, 171) Broome may be overstating things here a bit, because it is also significant *what would have happened* had one not died at eighty-two. But as we’ve just seen, due to the vagueness of counterfactuals, restricting our attention to what would have happened is insufficient to make it the case that dying at eighty-two is absolutely bad.

If this account of the badness of death is correct, it complicates the picture about rational attitudes towards death. How should Jim feel about his death? Since there is no univocal answer to the question of whether his death is bad, it seems there is also no univocal answer to what attitude or emotion is appropriate for him to have about his death. (The answer can’t be: relative to one context he should fear it, but relative to another he shouldn’t.) Death is not intrinsically good or bad, so intrinsic indifference remains appropriate towards death; but there seems to be no absolute answer to the question of how to feel about death taking everything into account.

3. Preferences About Life and Death

Given that the badness of death is contrastive, when looking for an attitude that would be fitting to have towards death, we should look for a contrastive attitude. A natural candidate would be *preference*. We do not simply prefer that P; we prefer P to some Q.

When is a preference rational? This seems easy: it is rational to prefer P to Q iff P is better than Q. Thus Jim ought to greatly prefer living a long healthy life to dying, and he should not prefer living a short life full of suffering to dying (depending on how much pain there is, maybe he should prefer death to continued life in such a state).

It may be rational to prefer P to Q even if P is worse than Q, as long as you have good reason to think that P is better than Q.⁴ This would be a “subjectively” rational, though incorrect, preference. Henceforth, I will generally talk of “correct” attitudes towards death rather than “rational” attitudes, since ‘rational’ is vague in this way.

So here is a simple part of the story about correct attitudes towards death: it is correct to prefer a particular future to death iff you would be better off given that future than if you died. But this still leaves out a lot. To prefer P to Q is consistent with liking both P and Q, and also with hating both P and Q. I prefer to suffer for one week rather than two weeks, but I desire neither. I prefer two weeks of enjoyment to one week, but I desire both. So merely preferring to live a long healthy life rather than to die is consistent with having positive attitudes towards both, or negative attitudes towards both. Having a positive attitude towards one’s death does not seem correct, nor does having a negative attitude towards survival when it would bring a good life. So

⁴ Thanks to Travis Timmerman for pointing this out.

our next question, which is the really difficult one, is to say what would justify a negative *but non-contrastive* attitude, such as fear or hatred, towards death.

In the case of attitudes towards suffering or enjoyment, we have an easy explanation. Suffering is intrinsically bad, so even though I prefer a week of suffering to two weeks of suffering, it makes sense to have a negative attitude towards both *considered in themselves*, since both are intrinsically bad. *Mutatis mutandis* for enjoyment. But in the case of death, this move is unavailable. When you are dead, nothing intrinsically good or bad is happening to you. Death is bad only in contrast to a way of being alive.

4. Preference and Desire

One possibility worth considering here is that many attitudes that we might have thought are non-contrastive, such as fear, are in fact contrastive after all.⁵ We fear death rather than a long happy future, but do not fear death rather than a short life of suffering.

One way this might be the case would be if the apparently non-contrastive attitude could be identified with a preference. Kris McDaniel and I have shown how this might be done in the case of some desires: we can identify certain desires – in particular, certain “conditional desires” – and certain preferences (McDaniel and Bradley 2008). Here is an example of what I mean by a conditional desire: I desire to go to Binghamton tomorrow on the condition that my tennis match is not canceled. The object of my desire is that I go to Binghamton; but my desire has a condition: that my match is not canceled. If I go to Binghamton but the match is canceled, my desire is not satisfied even though the object of my desire obtains. My desire is also not

⁵ Thanks to Taku Tanikawa for pressing this suggestion.

frustrated. McDaniel and I argue that in this case my desire is canceled or void – it is in a way as if this desire never happened. (Of course, I also have other desires that would be frustrated, e.g. the desire to play tennis tomorrow.) We can understand preference in terms of conditional desire: I prefer P to Q if and only if I desire that P on the condition that either P or Q but not both. Suppose S, incorrectly, prefers death to a good life. It follows that S desires to die on the condition *that S lives a worthwhile life or S dies*; so that desire must also be incorrect, since it is identical to an incorrect preference.

If this is correct then it may be incorrect to have certain desires to die or not to die: namely, those desires that are identical to incorrect preferences concerning death. Disappointingly, however, this hasn't really got us very much at all. Just as one can prefer one arm chopped off to both yet hate to have any arms chopped off, someone can desire to live on the condition that one lives a good life or dies, but still hate or like both options *unconditionally*. So attempting to identify desires with preferences will not accomplish much.

In general there seems to be no reason to think that *all* of the attitudes we have towards death are contrastive attitudes, even if some are. Perhaps the non-contrastive attitudes we have towards death (other than intrinsic indifference) are all incorrect, or perhaps they cannot be evaluated at all. But it would be better not to have to say such things. So I will next offer an account of how to evaluate a non-contrastive attitude towards death.

5. Emotion regulated by preference?

Sometimes it seems that one attitude regulates another. Beliefs, for example, can regulate other attitudes. Suppose I come to believe that eggs are an unhealthy food. This belief causes me

to be averse to eggs; furthermore, if I were to lose that belief, I would no longer be averse to them. In this case we may say that my belief that eggs are unhealthy regulates my aversion to eggs. Suppose also that my belief is false: eggs are in fact healthy. In such a case, we might criticize my aversion by criticizing the belief on which it is based. I *shouldn't feel that way* about eggs because my feeling is based on a falsehood. Likewise, if my belief that eggs are unhealthy is unjustified by my evidence, then my hatred is subjectively irrational. The defect in the belief infects the attitude it regulates. This does not presuppose that the aversion to eggs is in any way *constituted* by a belief that eggs are bad. The belief is one thing, and the aversion is another. A constitution relation is not required for incorrectness to be transmitted; rather, I suggest, the weaker relation of regulation is sufficient for transmission.

Another way in which we can criticize an attitude by appealing to beliefs is by pointing out that given one's beliefs, one ought or ought not to have a certain attitude. For example, suppose I do not want to go to the dentist because of the painfulness of having my teeth cleaned. But you convince me that I would be better off in the long run if I go. So I truly believe that I would be better off if I went. Still, I fail to form a desire to go. My failing to desire to go to the dentist is incorrect because it is insufficiently sensitive to my true beliefs.

We might say similar things about preference. A non-contrastive attitude such as fear may be regulated by a preference in the same way it can be regulated by a belief: the preference causes the fear, and if the preference went away, so would the fear. In such a case, when the preference is incorrect, so is the fear. Or, a correct preference may fail to generate a relevant desire. If someone correctly prefers a long happy life to death, but does not fear death when given the choice between life and death, her failure to fear death is incorrect because it is insensitive to her correct preferences.

So far, this is only a rough outline of a view. I have given only some sufficient conditions for an attitude or emotion to be incorrect. I have not given necessary conditions. Nor have I said anything about *degrees*. Suppose negative attitude E towards P is regulated by a correct preference for some Q rather than P. But suppose the attitude is mild even though P is much worse than Q, or the attitude is strong even though P is only a little worse than Q. Those seem like incorrect attitudes too – not in valence but in strength. A complete view of the correctness of attitudes should have a proportionality constraint: the degree of a negative emotion should not be out of proportion to its regulating belief or preference.

I think this view will explain many cases of incorrect attitudes towards death. There are other cases, however, where something seems to be going wrong with respect to attitudes towards death that cannot be explained by the account just given. Consider, for example, someone who is constantly in total fear of death, and whose fear is regulated by a correct preference to live rather than die. Since his fear is not regulated by an incorrect preference, I have so far given no reason to think this person is making any kind of emotional mistake. I think, however, that we should accuse this person of a kind of irrationality that does *not* have to do with incorrect attitudes towards death. Rather, fearing death all the time is inconsistent with *also* having appropriate attitudes towards *other things*, so even though the fear is correct, it makes an overall negative contribution to the correctness of one's attitudes and emotions. Someone who is constantly in fear of death cannot properly appreciate the good things in life, and so the constant fear of death is irrational in virtue of this indirect effect on the correctness of one's emotions on the whole.

A potentially more serious problem for this view is that preference might be importantly different from belief. In particular, belief seems like a fundamental attitude, but preference does

not. One does not believe that P in virtue of having other attitudes towards P. But when one prefers P to Q, this is, arguably, in virtue of the fact that one's desire that P is stronger than one's desire that Q, or it is in virtue of one's desiring P and being averse to Q, or hoping for P and fearing that Q. Preferences *supervene* on more basic attitudes. If that is so, then preference is not fundamental. Now suppose that fear is fundamental. The question becomes, how could a non-fundamental attitude such as preference regulate a fundamental attitude such as fear? If preference is not fundamental, then any time we might have thought preference was regulating fear, some other fundamental state is really doing the regulating. And if that state is not contrastive, then my proposed solution seems to melt away, because the very thing we were unable to find was a way to justify non-contrastive attitudes towards death.

Not only does the explanation melt away, but other strange results follow. Suppose, for example, that you correctly prefer P to Q. But you have that preference in virtue of having attitude A1 towards P and attitude A2 towards Q. A1 and A2 might be incorrect attitudes, but your preference could still be correct. You might, for example, incorrectly hate both chocolate and vanilla ice cream, but in virtue of your stronger hatred of vanilla, correctly prefer chocolate to vanilla. In the case of death, you might correctly prefer a long happy life to an early death, but this must be in virtue of more fundamental, non-contrastive attitudes you have towards those things. But the very thing we have been trying to figure out is what could justify a non-contrastive attitude towards death. And it seems you can have a correct preference for life over death while also having incorrect non-contrastive attitudes towards life and death on which that preference supervenes.

But there is a way out here. Recall that there is one non-contrastive attitude towards death that is justified: intrinsic indifference. That is to say, when you consider the state of being dead

all by itself, you should be indifferent towards it, since nothing good or bad will happen to you while you are dead. You may have a preference concerning death in virtue of (a) being intrinsically indifferent towards death and (b) having a positive or negative attitude towards continued existence. That preference may in turn regulate an all-things-considered non-contrastive attitude towards death. So even if preference is not fundamental, it can still regulate a fundamental non-contrastive attitude.

7. Conclusion and Remaining Questions about Existential Terror

Here, then, are some ways that you might have incorrect attitudes towards death. You might fail to be intrinsically indifferent towards death—you might have a positive or negative attitude towards nonexistence considered in itself. You might fail to have a pro-attitude towards the intrinsic goods of which death deprives you, or a con-attitude towards the intrinsic evils. You might prefer to die rather than live, even though living would be better for you than dying; or you might prefer to live rather than die even though dying would be better for you. You might have an attitude towards death that is regulated by an incorrect preference or belief. Finally, you might fail to have an attitude towards death that you should have, given your correct preferences and beliefs. Perhaps there are other ways to have an incorrect attitude too.

There is another case that is puzzling, and might challenge the entire framework within which I am working. Consider the person who feels *existential terror* or angst at the prospect of death. When considering that at some future time, she will no longer exist, she is filled with terror. She does not obsess about it, but contemplating a future in which she is simply not there is terrifying to her.

If it is fitting, then existential terror poses a problem for the general framework I have presupposed, because terror is not normally a fitting attitude to have towards a mere deprivation of well-being. It is too intense. When we are going to miss out on some good things, we may be sad but not terrified. Even if you are going to miss out on a great many good things, this would seem to justify only sadness, not terror. Consider also that you can have existential terror even if you know you do not have much of a good life to look forward to. The intensity of the terror is disproportionate to the loss of well-being.

This suggests that to account for the correctness of existential terror requires moving to a framework that does not explain the correctness of an emotion by appeal to potential gains or losses of well-being. A tentative thought is that it could be explained instead by appeal to meaningfulness. The prospect of going out of existence terrifies because it threatens to make one's existence, one's activities and goals, meaningless (Rorty 1994, 104). No matter how hard you work to achieve some goal, and no matter how important that goal might seem, you'll end up dead; furthermore, the thing you achieved will cease to matter after enough time goes by. The thought is that if your activities are ultimately meaningless, then so was your life. Meaningfulness and well-being are, arguably, distinct axes of valuation; in principle, one might be well-off even though one's life is completely without meaning, and one might have a meaningful life (supposing this is possible) but be badly off.

It is far from clear either that a finite existence cannot be meaningful, or that there is any particular link between terror and meaninglessness. It is also unclear whether existential terror is in fact justified. Whether considerations of meaninglessness can fully explain the correctness of existential terror will await further investigation. But there is no reason to think that considerations of well-being, or indeed any single kind of consideration, can explain all of our

attitudes. So we should not be surprised if there are some, like perhaps existential terror, that are not accounted for by the view I have presented here.

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