

Fear of Death and the Will to Live

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The fear of death resists philosophical attempts at reconciliation. Building on theories of emotion, I argue that we can understand our fear as triggered by a *de se* mode of thinking about death which comes into conflict with our will to live. The discursive mode of philosophy may help us to avoid the *de se* mode of thinking about death, but it does not satisfactorily address the problem. I focus instead on the voluntary diminishment of one's will to live. I argue that we can encourage a natural tendency for the will to live to decline as we approach death. I then consider two objections: Is not the will to live too fundamental for us to control? And even if we can control it, would not a declining will to live result in a general despair that it is better to resist? I argue that both of these objections can be overcome.

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Fear of death is a stubborn feature of the human predicament. Yet I believe we can make some headway by considering it in connection with our will to live. I argue that our will to live can be, if not outright controlled, then at least understood and managed in a way that undermines fear. The strategy I propose does not guarantee reconciliation, but it does encourage a curious kind of optimism.

1. The Problem

The issue is hard not to take personally. No doubt many of us have nodded our heads in agreement when coming across Schopenhauer's claim that death is the inspiring muse of philosophy (1909/1844: Ch.41, 249). Philosophy is attractive in part because it offers

to help us get around our fear; to become reconciled to the entire human situation. The problem is that philosophical arguments against the fear of death *just don't work*.

I discern 4 major arguments in the literature aimed at reconciling us with death (or rather 4 types of argument, since they come in various forms). The most famous is of course the Epicurean argument (~300BC/1994): We should not fear death because harm requires experience, and death by its very nature precludes experience.¹ Lengthy discussion has been generated concerning whether, given Epicurus' points, we can still rationally construe death as a harm. Nagel's (1970) deprivation argument develops well enough the intuitive point that, if I want to live, then anything that frustrates that desire can rationally be feared.²

To some extent I find the debates around the Epicurean argument to be missing the point. No one who has read Larkin's poem *Aubade* with any sympathy is convinced by Epicurus. It's precisely the prospect of what Larkin calls 'total emptiness forever' that we find so horrifying. Scheffler (2013) has an arresting description of how this thought 'unmoors us'.

My only resources for reacting to this prospect seem to involve turning back on myself a set of attitudes—such as sadness, grief, rage, anxiety—that are tailored to circumstances in which the self endures and undergoes a loss. But those attitudes become unmoored when directed

¹ The Lucretian symmetry argument trades upon the same basic point.

² Recently Kaila Draper (2012) argues that deprivation arguments cannot account for harm, because any slightly worse situation (like a slightly worse massage) is comparatively bad. Yet on an emotional level, if I really, deeply, wanted a good massage and there was a prospect that I wouldn't get it, then it would be entirely appropriate for me to fear this outcome. When it comes to death we need only specify that if we really want anything, then getting to live is often a condition on getting it.

toward their very subject. And this induces, or can induce, *panic*. (2013: 86, italics in original)

Kathy Behrendt (2019: 201-204) similarly argues that the fear of death is not particularly concerned with either intrinsic or comparative harm. Comparable to radical sceptical scenarios, the thought of death induces a vertigo-like sense of our foundations being utterly undermined (cf. Nagel 1986: 226-228, also Baillie 2020: 2591). Thus the distinctive fear of death—the fear precisely of annihilation—can be triggered by thinking of the very thing that Epicurus claims to preclude any harm.

Similar resistance can be triggered by the second major attempt at reconciliation. Bernard Williams (1973) and others have argued that we would not want immortality. There would inevitably come a point when we would succumb to utter tedium and life would be unendurable. This point is closely linked with the idea that death gives shape or meaning to life (e.g. Nussbaum 2009: 225-232). Other philosophers have disagreed of course (e.g. Fischer 2012; Rosati 2012). Yet even if one is convinced by Williams, one need hardly be reconciled with death. One can just as easily think that one wants neither death, nor endless life. One is impossibly trapped between two appalling outcomes (cf. May 2009: 78).

A third, pragmatic argument for reconciliation is less commonly raised, but can be found expressed by Stoic philosophers such as Epictetus.

I ask you, where am I to escape death? Point me to the place, point me to the people, among whom I am to go, on whom it does not light, point me to a charm against it. If I have none, what would you have me do? I cannot escape death: am I not to escape the fear of it? Am I to die in tears and trembling? For trouble of mind springs from this, from wishing for a thing which does not come to pass. Wheresoever I can alter external things to suit my own will, I alter them: where I cannot, I am fain to tear any man's eyes out who stands in my way. (Epictetus ~108AD/1916: Ch.27)

That is, we shouldn't fear death because there's nothing we can do about it. It will happen regardless of whether we worry about it or not.³ Indeed it's the easiest thing in the world to die. Babies manage with perfect aplomb. But again, the fact that death is inescapable just makes me feel like a rat in a cage, where the cage is my body and I'm headed off the Niagara Falls (cf. Murphy 1976: 188, though he ultimately endorses Epictetus' stance).

Finally, we have a fourth reconciling argument that death is a necessary feature of the renewal of life- that the replacement of old life with new life is part of the flourishing of our species. Life goes on, just not for me. Martha Nussbaum (drawing on Lucretius ~55BCE/2001: Book III, 967-71) says that this consideration, 'asks from us a deeper and more consistent love of life and change, a love that is willing to confront one's own small place in the whole' (2009: 223). She quotes Santayana, 'one who lives the life of the universe cannot be much concerned for his own' (1910: 56).

The argument reminds me of when my daughter was seven years old, and my wife attempted (a bit clumsily) to console her about death by saying that we have children to replace ourselves. My daughter, quite naturally, started to fear having children.

Taking a rather more philosophical tack, Nussbaum does not claim that the consideration of death's natural role should eliminate fear, or even the sense of death's tragedy, but only that it can 'diminish the sense of injustice' (2009: 223). I think we can grant this yet still retain a powerful sense in which the prospect of death threatens our most vital self-interest. The so-called circle of life is a wheel that crushes me. Indeed, having children can even reinforce the fear of death, because one may be stung by the

³ There's a related argument that fear requires uncertainty, and since death as such is certain, fear is irrational (see Kagan 2012: 292). However, I reject the claim that fear always requires uncertainty (though uncertainty can modulate the emotion). In a simple case, if I know I'm about to be hit by a car, I will feel fear.

prospect of leaving them behind. One can also be distressed by the thought of *their* eventual death.

My point is not that any of the classic philosophical arguments are bad per se. On the contrary, I think they all offer important and valuable considerations. My point is that a strongly determined fear will not be put off by them. In each case, the fear of death can turn them around and present the reconciling consideration as precisely that which is to be feared.

Now I can imagine an interlocutor complaining that they should not be expected to reconcile a determined fear. They are interested in the rationality of fearing death. There is not much we can say to someone who persists in their irrational fears. That's a job for psychiatrists (cf. Murphy 1976: 188). Yet I hope not too many philosophers are attracted by this response. To me it suggests a kind of refusal to face the real issue. It abandons the noble Epicurean project to use philosophy to help people live well, retreating instead into formal arguments that while intelligent enough, make no actual difference to people's lives. Again, that's not why I got into philosophy.

Overall, I find myself rather like Axiochus in the titular pseudo-Platonic dialogue, who rejects the barrage of Epicurean arguments:

You have offered these clever thoughts from the rubbish that's fashionable these days. That's where this silly talk fashioned for the young comes from. But the deprivation of the goods of life still pains me, and will do even if you come up instead with some arguments even more persuasive than these, Socrates. You see, my mind doesn't understand but is carried along by the eloquence of the arguments. They don't even touch the surface but do produce a fine parade of words. They just fall short of the truth. My woes are not relieved by clever arguments; only those that can get through to my soul will do. (30AD/1981: 369d1-e2)

That is, I am concerned that philosophy in general might not be up to the job of reconciliation. However as someone who, after many years of practice, has become habitually inclined to philosophise- this doubt itself strikes me as a philosophical one.

That is, the solution is not to abandon philosophy, but to think more deeply about how philosophy and the fear of death interact.

2. The First-Person Perspective

I believe the best way to make progress is to understand the fear of death as a psychological event with identifiable causes and conditions. That is, we need to do some philosophy of emotion. This approach is not unique to me. Philosophers who have focused on the fear of death *qua* emotion include Rorty (1983), Berhendt (2010; 2019) and Hine (2017). However, what I find missing from these discussions is a straightforward sense in which, like all other emotions, stimulating the fear of death has two necessary conditions: a triggering thought that presents the situation from a first-person standpoint, and a background concern for which this triggering thought is relevant (cf. De Sousa 1987; Roberts 2003; Cochrane 2018). That is, any emotional episode requires both that there's something one cares about (e.g. one's health, one's car, one's job etc.) plus a distinctly confrontational sort of awareness that the thing one cares about is affected (e.g. my car is being impounded! I might lose my job!). In the case of the fear of death, I identify the background concern with the will to live, an analysis of which will take up the second half of this essay. But first there are some interesting observations we can make about the triggering thought.

The first observation we can make is that even people who, like me, admit to fearing death don't feel that fear all the time, despite the fact of death being constant. On the contrary, we are perfectly able to engage in philosophical discussions about death while feeling no discernible anxiety (cf. Valberg 2007: 155). Of course the fear of death can be analysed as a long-standing disposition that only triggers episodic fear under certain conditions, but what are those triggering conditions exactly? The crucial moment is I think aptly described by one of Irvin Yalom's patients in his book *Staring at the Sun*:

I suppose the strongest feelings came from realizing it would be ME who will die, not some other entity like Old-Lady-Me or Terminally-Ill-and-Ready-to-Die-Me. I suppose I always thought about death obliquely, as

something that *might* happen rather than *would* happen. (patient in Yalom 2008: 13, italics in original)

The point being made here is that the intellectual recognition of one's death is distinct from recognising one's death from a first person or *de se* point of view—as something that *will* happen to *this* thing right here.⁴ When I fear death, I identify myself in a direct first personal way with the thing that dies. Again, this is a common feature of emotional cognition; that an objective manner of presenting certain facts is insufficient to trigger an emotion (cf. Teroni 2007: 307).⁵

It is for this reason that emotions are standardly triggered by perceptions and mental images (or a combination of such) (cf. Goldie 2000: 20; Morton 2013). Perception and imagery preserve a *de se* mode of presentation that is abstracted away in discursive thought. It is debateable whether perception or imagery is necessary to trigger emotion. Imagery can occur so fast that it's introspectively hard to be sure whether it is present. Currently I have only found clear evidence that emotions are intensified by imagery (e.g. Holmes & Mathews 2005; 2010). Yet I struggle to see how the *de se* mode can be attained in a purely discursive mode. Even when I say to myself, 'I will die' this thought seems to lack sufficient weight unless accompanied by an immediate sensory grasp of my existence as a living being—of my 'me-ness' and an idea of this me-ness being gone—as described in the Scheffler passage quoted above. An interoceptive sense of myself then, contrasted with my imagined absence.

⁴ James Baillie similarly identifies an essentially first-person perspective when we are hit by what he calls the 'existential shock' of our mortality. This contrasts with discursive thinking about death in which "I cannot fully grasp that I, the one at the center of this arena of thought and action, will cease" (2020: 2597-2598). It is not clear whether Baillie thinks the first-person mode of presentation is true of all emotional triggers, however I agree with Baillie that other emotions do not so radically undermine the foundations of the first-person perspective.

⁵ Recall in this context Ivan Ilyich's merely abstract grasp of the mortality syllogism in Tolstoy's famous story (1886/1995: 54).

We can break down this psychological process further. In my experience, the fear of death typically results from an impulse to grasp more properly some disquieting thought or inference about death. For instance, one passes a graveyard in winter and wonders how cold is the earth in which the dead are buried. There is then an impulse to grasp what that is like. This impulse can initially trigger what we may call a variable fear of death, comparable to any fear in which I imagine or anticipate something unpleasant (e.g. how cold it would be to walk barefoot in the snow!). The distinctive fear of death comes when, in an attempt to be true to what I am contemplating, I subtract myself as the subject of the harm, leading to the paradoxical sense of oneself described by Scheffler and others. In this way, the variable fear of death gives way to the core fear of death, in which no particular situation need be imagined.

Emotion psychology has the resources to describe what is happening in this second stage. When we anticipate a harm, it is typical (though not necessary) to also calculate coping potential (see Scherer 2005; Cochrane 2018: 108-111; Yih et al. 2020 for reviews). To calculate coping potential is comparable to simulating if one has the capacity to catch the bus before it pulls away. That is, when faced with some peril, we calculate if we have the resources to deal with it. If we project that we have the resources, this helps to ameliorate one's fear. If we project that we don't, this intensifies one's fear, in extreme cases to the point of panic. When confronting death as such (rather than some variable manner of death) any calculation of coping potential should lead to the conclusion that coping is impossible, because one's resources for coping are entirely lacking. Thus panic is the intelligible consequence. Moreover, a calculation of coping potential helps to explain why the distinctive fear of death turns inward, away from variable fears, towards the first-person sense of one's self rammed hard up against its projected absence.

Given this analysis of the psychology of the emotion trigger, the Epicurean argument that we cannot experience death becomes highly relevant. If triggering the distinctive fear requires a simulation of my absence, then of course I am imagining something incoherent, as other philosophers have pointed out (e.g. Evra 1971; de Sousa 2003: 107;

Behrendt 2010: 677).⁶ It can even be argued that to imagine the event of dying—the moment of transitioning from life to death—is to imagine something that we cannot possibly experience. As Wittgenstein observed, ‘our life has no end in just the way in which our visual field has no limits’ (1922: 6.4311). That is, just as seeing the limits of one’s visual field would require one, per impossible, to take a standpoint beyond one’s visual field such that the edge can be presented, so experiencing the transition to death would require one, per impossible, to take a standpoint beyond one’s own experience such that the edge of experience is presented. It is for the same reason that we do not experience the transition to unconsciousness when we fall asleep each night.

This is not to deny that we might attempt to imagine the impossible, and that for a lot of people the imagining of death or dying becomes habitual. But awareness that the imaginative trigger is irrational is helpful for encouraging us to seek other ways to think about death. Most importantly, we seem to be able to control our mode of thinking. That is, while the subject matter of our thoughts (i.e. death) often comes to us without our voluntary control, we are quite capable of shifting from an imagistic *de se* mode to an abstract discursive mode.⁷ And once in the discursive mode of thought, and avoiding the imagistic mode, we can think about death as much as we like without fear. Indeed, this is what allows me to write this essay.

This capacity for control, I should emphasise, is most powerful when we are not panicking. Once overcome by the fear of death, it is very hard to shift one’s attention (though not, I think, impossible). My tendency rather is to notice that I am starting to wonder what death is like, which cues me to shift my thinking style.

⁶ Behrendt (2010) argues from this that the fear of death is a counterexample to theories of emotion that rely on perception or imaginative triggers. In contrast, I claim that we are trying to imagine something incoherent.

⁷ Note that there are also imagistic modes that are not clearly *de se*, such as picturing a world without me in it, though even here it is easy to construe whatever perspective is given on the scene as ‘my’ perspective.

Unfortunately, I do not know of experimental evidence confirming (or denying) this observation, and so I can only appeal to the reader to check their own intuitions on this matter. It is a slightly different claim than the Wittgensteinian claim that imagination is 'subject to the will' (1980: §80) (which I understand as the claim that we can always voluntarily shift the *contents* of our imaginative projects even if they initially strike us automatically).⁸ I am proposing that whether or not one engages in imagery at all is subject to the will. Or perhaps it is a shift to the auditory imagery of inner speech. Either way, this mode of thinking helps to exclude the common trigger of the fear of death.

Indeed, the shift to discursive thought about death is perhaps the most effective therapeutic feature of philosophical discussions of death. Philosophy shifts us to an objective mode of thought. It has a way of puzzling the will such that we get caught up in abstract questions about what it even means to die, or for death to be a harm, and in so doing excludes the *de se* style of thinking about death that generates fear.

So far then, I argue that recognizing the way that emotions get triggered and managing one's emotion in line with that understanding has genuine therapeutic power.

Furthermore, I am beginning to develop my meta-philosophical theme; that philosophical arguments are as much a mode of thought as a set of propositions to debate, and that the abstract mode of philosophy avoids the *de se* mode of emotions.

Yet I doubt that my points about imaginative triggers are sufficient to reconcile us with the fear of death. First, it is still coherent to imagine one's condition a short time prior to death and that may be terrifying enough. Second, I am not confident that we can always have the presence of mind to shift into an objective and philosophical mode of thinking, and this may be particularly true when one is imminently facing death. Third, the mere avoidance of the emotional trigger hardly tackles any deeper conviction one may have that one's death is a catastrophic harm. A related fourth point is that if one engages in philosophical speculation as a means to shift away from the first-person emotional

⁸ Ichikawa usefully clears up some confusions about this claim (2009: 106-108).

perspective, it can seem like a denial of a vital first-person truth. By shifting into philosophy, one has failed to properly confront the problem.⁹

Thus I regard the recommendation that we shift our imaginative stance to be a temporary palliative rather than an enduring solution. It gives us some mental space to consider the deeper driver of the fear of death.

3. The Will to Live

Standard arguments that death is a harm rely on the claim that death deprives us of things that we want. We may be explicitly or implicitly aware that the satisfaction of some desire gives us a reason to stay alive. For instance, in an implicit case, we may imagine the desire's satisfaction involving the active doing or enjoyment of something. Borrowing from Williams (1973: 85-86) we can call all desires that demand being alive 'categorical desires'.¹⁰ The will to live, I claim, is the psychological summation of our categorical desires.

In the following section, I will examine the nature of the will to live in some detail. Some may argue that the will to live is not merely the summation of categorical desires, but a fundamental drive, prior to and independent of any categorical desire. Before we get onto this debate, however, we should first assuage any doubts that the will to live is a real thing. There are several reasons why we should think this is the case.

First, the will to live can apparently be lost. People suffering suicidal depression lose the will to live and prefer to die (or live in a state of inertia until they either die or regain

⁹ I do not, by the way, think that discursive philosophy always avoids emotional truths.

Emotional experience can often be productively elaborated with discursive thought in which one tries to understand what is going on. Michael Brady's book on emotion (2013: ch.5) seems to me a good example of this.

¹⁰ Williams contrasts these with 'conditional desires'; desires one has only *providing* that one is alive. Death does not frustrate such desires.

the will to live). One of the most dramatic demonstrations of this phenomenon comes from Victor Frankl's account of certain prisoners in the Nazi concentration camps who became utterly apathetic and uninterested in continuing to live.

The prisoner who had lost faith in the future—his future—was doomed. With his loss of belief in the future, he also lost his spiritual hold; he let himself decline and became subject to mental and physical decay. Usually this happened quite suddenly, in the form of a crisis, the symptoms of which were familiar to the experienced camp inmate. We all feared this moment—not for ourselves, which would have been pointless, but for our friends. Usually it began with the prisoner refusing one morning to get dressed and wash or to go out on the parade grounds. No entreaties, no blows, no threats had any effect. He just lay there, hardly moving. (1984: 82)

At the other end of the scale, we can discern in certain extraordinary cases of survival a powerful will to live. Consider for instance the real-life examples dramatized in films such as *127 Hours*, *The Revenant*, and *Touching the Void*. What we see in these cases is that despite major physical injuries and near-impossible circumstances, people are sometimes able to make Herculean efforts to survive; these people adamantly want to live.

More mundanely, there are a number of empirical studies indicating that people can readily report their will to live, even to the point of quantifying it on a graph (e.g. Carmel 2001; Tataryn and Chochinov 2002). Interestingly, subjective reports of one's will to live are positively correlated with survival rates, even when these reports are controlled against physical health and age (Carmel, Baron-Epel and Shemy 2007; Karppinen et al. 2012). Similarly, the will to live is credited with making a difference between whether someone is able to endure an illness such as tuberculosis. For instance, the desperately sad death of Anne Frank from tuberculosis in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp is partly attributed to her loss of hope after believing (falsely) that both her parents were dead.

These various lines of evidence indicate that the will to live is a real phenomenon. Regardless of whether or not the will to live is a fundamental drive, it is both reportable and causally efficacious. I now propose that when we fear death, it is because the prospect of death is resisted by one's will to live, which triggers a panicked response. On the flip side, when one loses the will to live, even a *de se* thought about dying is unable to trigger fear.

In so far as our will to live is the summation of our categorical desires, it lies behind both what I earlier called variable fears of death (e.g. fear of being in the cold ground) and the distinctive fear of death as such. Earlier I described how the distinctive fear of death is the consequence of an evaluation of coping potential. If we don't care to avoid some specific harm of death because we lack the concern to be alive (effectively, we don't consider it a harm), then we can neither generate a fearful presentation of that harm, nor proceed to a calculation of whether or not we can cope with that harm. Even if we were to jump straight to the core paradoxical sense of oneself as non-existent, this thought only distresses because we prefer existing (i.e. we have a categorical desire). Paradoxes where we don't care one way or the other do not trigger panic.

Note that when people with depression cite reasons for living, the fear of death is sometimes identified (e.g. Linehan et al. 1983; Mason et al. 2021). Given that I identify the will to live as a condition on the fear of death as such, I must infer that, where the depressed person fears non-existence, they have not fully lost their will to live.¹¹ This need not be a problem for my approach. It should not take much to retain a will to live. Any categorical desire is either underpinned by it (if the will to live is fundamental) or

¹¹ In some cases, fear may be explained by thoughts about an afterlife to which the depressed person is averse. If the depressed person prefers life to an unpleasant afterlife (e.g. hell), then this fear is grounded in categorical desires. If, however, the depressed person prefers non-existence to both life and afterlife then their fear of an afterlife is not grounded in a categorical desire. Yet this latter scenario is unlikely to apply to all depressed fears of death, leaving a remainder of cases in which death as non-existence is feared. Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this possibility.

contributes to it (if summative) and the more powerful one's categorical desires, the more powerful one's will to live should be. Thus I take the will to live to be a drive that one can possess to a greater or lesser degree, in line with the cited empirical studies.

It is then the variability of the will to live that is the central claim upon which I ground my reconciliation for the fear of death. First, let us re-evaluate the fear of death itself. An episode in which we fear death is indirectly an experience of the will to live. One's panicked response expresses the strength of one's desire to live, and the drive to make that happen. It is an assertion of one's vitality. Other philosophers have had similar thoughts. Indeed, several point out that we should fear death because it is an impetus to live as long as we can (e.g. Murphy 1976: 198; Rorty 1983: 180; Ewin 2002). Relatedly, the fear of death helps us to re-appreciate the things that we value. When we fear losing something, we guard it all the more jealously. So in this sense, we can viably appraise *the psychological event* of the fear of death as a good thing, even if the fact of death remains a bad thing.

My second and more critical claim is that as we approach death, we can expect our will to live to naturally decline. In addition, we are capable of making psychological adjustments that encourage or help along this natural decline to the point where the will to live is too weak to trigger fear.

Why believe this? The main reason is that although one's will to live can vary independently of one's physical health, it is clear that one's sense of physical health is a major determinant. One of the main findings concerning subjects' reports of the will to live is that their ratings tend to decline as they approach death (Tataryn and Chochinov 2002; Carmel 2011; Kappinen et al. 2012).¹² We can account for this decline in terms of a decline in the strength and frequency of categorical desires. People either

¹² Though Tataryn and Chochinov (2002) emphasise that the measured decline on average is accompanied by significant fluctuations within individual ratings. Unsurprisingly, the alleviation of pain makes a difference to patients' day to day will to live ratings. In section 5, I also allow that some people resist a decline in their will to live.

intellectually accept that certain desires cannot be achieved and they give them up, or their declining strength discourages the formation of new desires that they find it hard to imagine achieving. Thus the weaker we get, the more our desires should contract until we concentrate upon the most immediate goals. Indeed, it is widely observed that as people approach death, even the desire to eat and drink tends to disappear.

Ultimately, we can get ourselves into a state in which we face the end of our lives with equanimity because we no longer possess the will to live.

There are a few ways I anticipate people reacting to this suggestion. Some will take it as obvious. They have witnessed friends and relatives who have shrugged off the will to live as they approach death and accepted their situation with grace. But to other people the prospect of such a decline is likely to seem horrific. They cannot see how it can be good for a person to lose their will to live. This, I must emphasise, is because they currently have a strong will to live, which reacts with repulsion to the thought of such decline. I will have more to say about this resistance in section 5. For now, I want to spell out more clearly my reconciling argument.

In a nutshell, my reconciling argument is that the healthy person fears death because their will to live is strong, but that's because they are healthy, so all things going well, they are not about to die. They can orient their attention away from the paradoxical sense of annihilation and meta-emotionally towards the psychological event of their resistance. In contrast, when we are actually going to die, we can allow and also help our will to decline to a point where we do not fear death. Thus, either way, the fear of death need not trouble us. If the fear of death is aroused, we can justifiably regard it not as a reliable guide to future distress, but only as an assertion of one's current vitality.

Of course, this reconciling argument supposes that prior to death we experience a decline in our health that allows time for our will to correspondingly decline (and there are other contingencies I address below). I find it conceivable that even a decline taking up only a few hours is sufficient for a corresponding decline in the will to live. Serious illness and injury have a way of powerfully concentrating our minds upon our immediate condition. Yet I can allow that a sudden heart attack won't be touched by my

argument. At least in such cases we don't have much time to suffer. That is, such cases are so sudden that attempts to psychologically prepare for them are otiose.

I should repeat here that my primary goal in this discussion is to ameliorate distressing emotions about the prospect of death. I am not out to rationally convince the reader that death is not a bad thing. But the reason I'm not trying to do that is because I regard appraisals of the badness of death to be relative to one's will to live (it is a similar thought that drives Ewin's 2002 analysis). We resist the philosophical arguments against the badness of death because of a basic fear of death, and this fear is rooted in our will to live. So if we can tackle that fear, we make ourselves open to philosophical reasons to accept death.

More straightforwardly, the prospect of death frustrates our desires. But if we lack these desires, then death is no longer frustrating.¹³ I don't think I am proposing anything very counter-intuitive here. It is common for us to adapt psychologically to mortality. For instance, we avoid forming unrealistically ambitious desires that would take a thousand years to fulfil. I propose only that our adaptation can be more radical, allowing us to fit our desires properly into the span of our lives.

4. Managing the Will to Live

Having now presented my core argument, the rest of this paper will be concerned with defending it against the most pressing objections. The issue most glaringly in need of further defense is probably the idea that we have any control at all over the will to live. As I have just stated, it seems to me psychologically common that we adapt our desires to our circumstances. However, I anticipate the objection that the will to live is too fundamental a feature of our psychologies to be susceptible to adaptation. That is, the

¹³ My view could be formulated in terms of the desire-satisfaction view of well-being, where death is a harm or not in virtue of our desires (and these can change over time). However, I don't think my arguments rely on this view of well-being. I only require that concerns are necessary for emotions and note that concerns manifest as desires.

objection does not accept that the will to live is merely the summation of our categorical desires. It is rather a fundamental drive that is prior to and independent of our categorical desires.

The 'fundamentalist' view on the will to live is a venerable philosophical position. For instance, Schopenhauer famously claims that the will to live is our most essential nature. Yet his argument for this claim is very weak. First Schopenhauer notes our extreme aversion to death. Then he claims that because life has little objective value, and we are going to die soon anyway, our attachment to life is 'irrational and blind.' This, he argues:

can only be explained from the fact that our whole inner nature is itself will to live, to which, therefore, life must appear as the highest good, however embittered, short, and uncertain it may always be; and that that will, in itself and originally, is unconscious and blind. (1909/1844: Ch.41, 252)

I won't quibble with Schopenhauer's claim that our attachment to life is irrational here (although it's false). The main problem is inferring from life being poor and short to the claim that the will to live is 'our whole inner nature'. On Schopenhauer's premises we could perhaps draw the Humean conclusion that desire is prior to reason. But there is absolutely nothing here that evidences the will to live as something more fundamental than our various mundane desires. On the contrary, the mere fact that, in a poor life, many desires go unsatisfied, is reason enough to think that we'll continue to bear those desires. Similarly, the fact that we desire life though our lives are (relatively) short again only need entail that we desire more than what we currently have. That's just the nature of desires; we are not forced to adaptively abandon them when they are frustrated. And thus, to the extent that our mundane desires are categorical desires, we can still claim that the will to live is founded upon them.

Of course, I have suggested that we do often adaptively give up desires, and at least some people lose the will to live—so this does imply that both our mundane desires and the will to live are responsive to reasons. Indeed, it's a deep instability in Schopenhauer's position that he claims that ascetics are apparently able to achieve a

mystical will-less state (e.g. 1909/1844: §68), despite his claim that the will to live is fundamental (for discussion see Wicks 2021).

Moving on from Schopenhauer, we may turn to Spinoza's doctrine of the *conatus*; that it is the essence of all (finite, existing) beings to strive for self-preservation. It is not at all clear- even restricting the claim to organic nature- that Spinoza's claim can make sense of suicide (for interesting discussions see Nadler 2016; Grey 2017; Buyse 2016). The standard Spinozist defense is that nothing destroys itself except through external influences. But even supposing this to be true, it seems that external influences can include reasons, such that the will to live is not immune to higher cognition and therefore possible to voluntarily adapt.

Taking a less metaphysical tack, we know that our cells are disposed to preserve themselves through cellular respiration. We might argue that our psychologies are founded upon this underlying metabolic system, such that the entire affective and conative system is geared ultimately towards self-preservation, even if the complex elaborations of psychology can lead us to desire some very strange things, including suicide. However, I think this picture is compatible with the claim that the will to live is the summation of more mundane desires to eat, drink, interact with our loved ones and so on. Our cells have no grand sense of life. They are narrowly focused upon their own metabolic processes. Similarly, our primitive drives for food and water are only focused on their immediate goals. All I propose is that as our health declines, we are able to give up our more elaborate desires- the kinds of desires that project beyond the immediate future. Then, natural biological processes cause our primitive drives to slow down and stop. They rely on energy for activation, and when that energy is not delivered, they lack motive force. Ultimately, our cells undergo programmed cell death. Biological nature does not strive endlessly for survival.

Once we give up our veneration of traditional views I see no arguments for thinking that the will to live is a fundamental drive. Phenomenologically, I find in myself desires for specific things. I can certainly distinguish basic impulses for survival from the reflective awareness that I wish to live. But in either case, their actual motive power derives from my mundane desires.

Suppose the reader grants this. Still, I have suggested that the will to live can be fed by any categorical desire (that is, any desire which demands for its satisfaction our continuing to live). Doesn't this imply that it's going to be incredibly hard to banish the will to live, since even the mildest, most trivial categorical desire can sustain it?

Actually, I'm willing to grant this. One interesting observation concerning the will to live is that timings of death show a responsiveness to significant events like Christmas or Passover (Phillips & King 1988; Shimizu & Pelham 2008). That is, there is an observed bump in death rates from natural causes (such as heart disease) following such events. It seems that people have a degree of partial, reason responsive, influence over the failure of certain biological systems. These are precisely cases where fairly minor reasons (getting to experience one last Christmas, or not to ruin Christmas for others) enable people to endure a little longer. Then, once these desires are satisfied, it seems that people are able to 'give up' and allow death to come.

Thus I think the will to live is robust and takes relatively little to sustain. Small goals are quite adequate to give us a desire to live and for this to be biologically efficacious. Nevertheless, there is evidence that the will to live has a tendency to naturally decline, and that we can help this along, adapting our desires to a point where we concentrate on more immediate goods. Supporting this point, a recent paper by Uku Tooming (2019) draws on a variety of psychological and neurological studies to argue that we can control our desires to the extent that the contents of our desires are elaborated by the imagination. Since we can control our imaginations, we can both strengthen or weaken existing desires. For example, Tooming observes that the manner in which we imagine food can strengthen or weaken our desire to eat (2019: 955-956). Another way to put this is that, even if we cannot directly stop wanting basic things involved in immediate survival processes, our control is sufficient to reduce the ambition of our desires. We can similarly resist pressures (from more highly motivated healthy people) to form larger goals, or to struggle for life beyond the immediate. This is all the control I require to justify my argument that we can encourage the natural tendency for the will to decline.

5. Avoiding Depression

The other major objection to my argument is that we ought not to give up the will to live, or that we should resist any natural tendency to decline, because to do so is equivalent to falling into despair.¹⁴ I associate this objection with Dylan Thomas's poem 'Do not go gentle into that good night'. Better to 'rage against the dying of the light'.

It certainly seems possible to resist the decline of one's will to live. We can use our imaginations to intensify the ambition of our desires. Indeed, if there's a realistic prospect that medical treatment will restore one's health, and if the will to live is causally efficacious, then it may be best to try and reinforce it. Yet there is an obvious sense in which, if we have come to a point where death is inevitable, it is futile to rage against it.

This view aligns with our major theories of well-being. A hedonic view of well-being should counsel the avoidance of unpleasant emotions such as anger and fear if they cannot lead to a greater number of positive affective states later on. A desire-satisfaction view of well-being should equally recommend that we avoid desires that are guaranteed to be frustrated. It is less clear what a virtue-theoretic account should recommend and I do not have the space to fully explore the issue here. There is perhaps something quite noble about struggling to the last. But it seems to violate the spirit of the golden mean in virtue theory to struggle fruitlessly against the inevitable.¹⁵ There is instead a virtue of reasoned resignation, or profound self-control.

¹⁴ A similar worry is implied by Hayes and Hubley (2017) when they propose that withdrawing the goal to continue living is "a root cause of depression". However, both Carmel (2011: 285) and Kappinen et al. (2012: 792) find that depression is distinct from a declining will to live, though they show correlations.

¹⁵ Cf. Lucretius' 'banquet argument' (~55BCE/2001, Bk III, lines 931-944) which suggests that there is a point of satiety beyond which it would be greedy to prolong life.

Nevertheless, I take the Thomas-esque objection seriously. Consider what it would actually mean to lose all categorical desires. It is not merely that we lose the desire for food and drink. We would also lose the desire to remain with our loved ones, to play a role in making the world a better place, to witness (or produce) developments in science and art, or simply to see how things turn out. Of these consequences, it is the loss of one's connections to loved ones that looks the most unpalatable. Art, science, and the struggles of the world will no doubt continue without us. Ideally, we shape our lives such that we complete the major projects that we care about (and form contingency plans for circumstances where they are curtailed), and otherwise trust that these things will continue in our absence (cf. the Santayana/Nussbaum argument cited in section 1). But with loved ones, particularly those who rely on us, there is a real sting to the thought of abandoning them that we are likely to resist. I think this case generates a significant contingency for a 'good death.' It is a genuine tragedy to leave behind a child. And others have an important role to play here in offering reassurance that our loved ones will manage without us.

Yet apart from the sense in which future goods could be lost (which seems to me reconcilable) there is a deeper challenge that merely to give up desires implies a bleaker outlook on the world; that in losing desire, the things we cherish will no longer seem to merit our appreciation. Losing the will to live implies losing the goodness of the world.

There is a definite phenomenon in which physical decline can accompany a more cynical outlook on things (e.g. Stavrova and Ehlebracht 2019). However, this does not seem inevitable. In particular, nothing I have said about reining in the ambitions of our desires demands that we fail to appreciate things in an immediate way, to the extent of our capacities to do so. This includes our loved ones. We can value their existence right here and now without nurturing the goal to remain endlessly with them.

In making sense of this attitude, it is worth grasping the widely supported distinction between valuing things practically, and valuing things in an aesthetic manner (e.g. Kant 1790/2007; Scarry 1999; Zangwill 2001; Westerman 2018; Stecker 2019). Practical valuing depends upon consumption, or ownership, or beneficial association with the target of value. This makes it vulnerable to the loss of one's capacity to consume, own,

or maintain a beneficial association. In contrast, we aesthetically appreciate things for their own sake, regardless of any practical benefits we may gain from them. For example, we can aesthetically value a landscape while lacking the resources to possess it or gain any practical benefit from it (the object may even be potentially harmful). I have argued elsewhere (Cochrane 2021: Chapter 1) that aesthetic and practical valuing must be psychologically linked if we are to make sense of the evolution of the aesthetic capacity. However, aesthetic drives are easier to reward than practical drives, since the aesthetic can be satisfied with mere appearance. Moreover, the world-directed character of the aesthetic, in contrast to the self-directed character of the practical, makes it most suitable for sustaining a sense of the value of the world. The upshot of this distinction is that in a state of physical decline, we will do better to cultivate the aesthetic attitude than the practical one. Those people who tend only to value things practically, to be driven to achieve and to possess, are likely to have a harder time maintaining a sense of the goodness of the world when their health declines.

This is of course an empirical prediction that I can only hope will stand up to empirical investigation. However, it does slot into the Epicurean tradition that one prepare oneself psychologically for death such that death is less of a threat. As Warren discusses (2004: 153-159; 199-212 cf. Luper 75-81) the more extreme recommendations of the Epicureans are not very appealing. They seek to eliminate all desires that could be thwarted by death. The implication that Warren draws out is that the strict Epicurean has no reason to continue living other than mere inertia. In contrast, I only propose that we narrow our interests to more immediate concerns as we approach death. I can still recommend living a life as full of achievement as is compatible with one's strength; of forming maximally satisfiable desires. This may mean that a premature, dissatisfied death remains possible, but in general I do not expect or wish to eliminate all such contingencies from my account.

6. **Metaphilosophy**

The final issue I shall address is an understandable resistance to the reconciliation I offer when I've given no actual reason for believing that death is alright after all. I have only proposed that we adapt to death by eliminating desires that would be frustrated by

it. To someone who fears death, this is liable to generate the same resistance as the four philosophical arguments surveyed in section 1. They don't want to eliminate their desires!

My response to this resistance is offer a metaphilosophical perspective. I see a process with four discernible moments: First we start with the problem of individuals like myself who have a standing disposition to fear death. The prospect of death constantly nags at us, threatening to spoil our enjoyment of life. It drives us into philosophy to seek ways to confront and overcome the fear. In this first moment, fear is followed by philosophical reflection.

The next moment is that having spent years, perhaps decades, turning over in our minds the problem and the various solutions on offer, we realise that philosophy is fundamentally limited in what it can do. The objective discursive mode of philosophy cannot properly tackle the subjective mode in which death confronts us. In this second moment we recognize a conflict in modes of thought.

Following on from this, we may then realise that the subjective mode in which death is imminent is likely to be very dissimilar to one's current attitude. We may then start to imagine what it would take to inhabit an appropriate attitude. This attitude is, I propose, a voluntary decline in one's will to live. The path to achieving this decline is fraught with contingencies, but it seems to be feasible. This is a third moment of imagined resignation.

Once again the philosophical impulse protests- you are not reconciled! Death still isn't good! Yet this is an inevitable conflict. We can either return to the second moment and engage in more philosophy, or impose some self-control over the will to philosophise itself. This is a hard thing. The philosophical impulse tends to reject limitations. But the fourth moment is to impose a limit on philosophy. Philosophy here is rather like

Wittgenstein's ladder (1922); something that gets us to point where we can see that it isn't helpful anymore.¹⁶

Overall, I have elucidated a position in which our goals and reasons are rooted in our biological vitality and we cannot expect to fundamentally break from that. However, the ways in which we cognitively elaborate our goals and reasons does seem to be up to us and it can have a major impact upon our well-being. In particular, I believe the strategy I have outlined can make the prospect of death less of a spoiler. I don't claim that we should avoid thinking about death entirely, or indeed philosophising about it, but I think we can legitimately set limits on such thinking.

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¹⁶ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out this reference.

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