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Jeff Noonan

University of Windsor

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The Life-Value of Death

Mortality, Finitude, and Meaningful Lives

Jeff Noonan*

Abstract

In his seminal reflection on the badness of death, Nagel links it to the permanent loss “of whatever good there is in living.” I will argue, following McMurtry, that “whatever good there is in living” is defined by the life-value of resources, institutions, experiences, and activities. Enjoyed expressions of the human capacities to experience the world, to form relationships, and to act as creative agents are (with important qualifications) intrinsically life-valuable, the reason why anyone would desire to go on living indefinitely. As Nagel argues, “the fact that we will eventually die in a few score years cannot by itself imply that it would not be good to live longer. If there is no limit to the amount of life that it would be good to have, then it may be that a bad end is in store for all of us.” In this paper I want to question whether in fact there is no limit to the amount of life it would be good to have. My general conclusion will be that it is not the case that the eternal or even indefinite prolongation of any particular individual life necessarily increases life-value. Were death thus somehow removed as an inescapable limiting frame on human life, overall reductions of life-value would be the consequence. Individual and collective life would lose those forms of moral and material life-value that form the bases of life’s being meaningful and purposive.

In his seminal reflection on death, Nagel links its badness to the permanent loss “of whatever good there is in living.”¹ Nagel identifies the good of living with the activities and experiences an individual person has over the course of his or her life. Death is bad because it deprives individuals of more of these goods. It is true that for the individual conceived in abstraction from the natural and social worlds of which he or she is a member death is bad because it deprives him or her of further experience. However, I will argue that it may not only not be bad, but actually a good, even for the individual who dies, if he or she thinks of himself or herself not as an abstract centre of experience, but as a member of fields of natural life-support and social life-development towards which certain duties are owed.²

* Professor of Philosophy, University of Windsor, 401 Sunset Ave Windsor, ON N9B 3P4, Canada.

¹ Thomas Nagel, “Death,” *Nous*, Vol. 4, No. 1, Feb. 1970, p. 78.

² Nagel’s argument is compatible with the conclusion that death can be relatively good if further living would produce no more activities and experiences that the person could regard as good. Subsequent versions of the ‘deprivation’ account of death’s badness also allow for the possibility that death can be a relative good if it brings to an end of life of unremitting pain and misery.

This argument will be supported by drawing upon the idea of “life-value” as spelled out in the work of John McMurtry. In general, life-value can be identified with Nagel’s “whatever good there is in living.” Whatever good there is in living, for life-value analysis, depends upon the instrumental life-values that living things must appropriate in order to keep on living and to develop their life-capacities. Examples of instrumental life-values for human beings include food and water, caring relationships that nurture our emotional life, and educational institutions through which our cognitive and imaginative capacities are developed.

The good of living as such, however, is not the appropriation of instrumental life-values, but the enjoyment of the life-capacities they enable. Intrinsic life-value is found in the form and content of the enjoyed expression of the human life-capacities to think, imagine, build and create, relate to other people, and sense and feel the world around us.

The crucial difference between life-value analysis and Nagel’s more general notion of “whatever good there is in living” is that life-value analysis understands people not as abstract egos accumulating experiences for themselves, but as members of natural fields of life-support and social fields of life-development. Consequently, the good of living is identified not with the accumulation of life-value, *come what may for nature and others*, but with the accumulation of life-values in ways that cohere with the sustainability of the natural world and the good of others in the social world upon which the experiences and activities of the ego depend.³ To be life-valuable, experiences and activities must not only be valued by an abstract ego, they must be “coherently inclusive” of the on-going life-supportive capacity of the natural world and the interests of other people in being able to express and enjoy their

The position to be defended here is not that death can be a relative good, but good even though it brings to an end a life which is still enjoyed by the person to the extent that the person abstracts him or herself from their relationships to nature and others in society. For other version of the ‘deprivation’ account of death’s badness see Fred Feldman, *Confrontations with the Reaper*, (New York: Oxford), 1992, pp. 139-140; Jay Rosenberg, *Thinking Clearly About Death*, 2nd edition, (Indianapolis: Hackett), 1997, p. xviii; Daniel Callahan, *The Troubled Dream of Life*, (Washington: Georgetown University Press), 2000, p. 84; John M. Collins, “The Deprivation Account of Death’s Badness,” *Death and Anti-Death*, Charles Tandy, ed., (Palo Alto: Ria University Press), 2003, pp. 333-358; Ben Bradley, “When is Death Bad for the One Who Dies,” *Nous*, 38 (1), 2004, pp. 1-24.

³ John McMurtry, “What is Good, What is Bad: The Value of All Values Across Times, Places, and Theories,” *Encyclopaedia of Life-Support Systems*, (Oxford: EOLSS Publishers and UNESCO), 2010, p. 74. (www.eolss.net) (accessed, March 14th, 2011).

life-capacities.⁴ When the framework within which the value of death is shifted, from the ego valuing its experiences in abstraction from the natural world and social relationships to an ego thinking of itself as a member of natural and social worlds, the possibility that death can have both instrumental and intrinsic life-value emerges.

It might appear, however, that life-value analysis, committed as it is to the ever more coherently inclusive growth of the intrinsic values of experience, thought, and action, must agree with Nagel that “the fact that we will eventually die in a few score years cannot by itself imply that it would not be good to live longer. If there is no limit to the amount of life that it would be good to have, then it may be that a bad end is in store for all of us.”⁵ This conclusion does not follow from the premises about life-value sketched above. The task at hand is to explain why the indefinite or even eternal prolongation of the life of an individual would not indefinitely or eternally increase life-value for the individual conscious of himself or herself as a member of natural and social fields of life and motivated by the goal of *coherently* maximising life-value.⁶

The argument will unfold in three main steps. In the first, the difference between the life-value standpoint and the ego-centric standpoint of the deprivation view of the badness of death will be further explicated. In the second, two distinct meanings of “death” will be defined and their relationship to the instrumental and intrinsic life-value of death be explained. In the final step four examples of the life-value of death will be examined and defended.

1. Individuals, Fields of Life, and the Principle of Life-Coherence

It is difficult to avoid egocentrism when the object of consciousness is the finitude of an individual’s life. When one brings the power of reflection to bear

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁵ Nagel, “Death,” p. 80.

⁶ The final section will reflect upon the possibility of immortality as a foil against which the value of finite life can better be determined. It should be noted at the outset that the position defended here does not regard immortality as a material possibility, because, as Steven Horrobin argues, immortality proper means absolute invulnerability, and material beings like humans always remain vulnerable to lethal changes in the external conditions upon which they depend. See Steven Horrobin, “Immortality, Human Nature, The Value of Life, and the Value of Life Extension,” *Bioethics*, 20(6), 2006, pp. 279-292. Arguments such as Horrobin’s have not dissuaded science from pursuing immortality. For the history of such efforts, see John Grey, *The Immortalization Commission: Science and the Strange Quest to Cheat Death*, (Toronto: Doubleday Canada), 2011; for the state of the art see the critical overview in Nicholas Agar, *Humanity’s End*, (Cambridge MA: MIT Press), 2010.

upon the necessity of one's death it is difficult to avoid the *feeling* that Nagel and other deprivation theorists are correct and that more life is, other things being equal, always good. The *only* way that death could be good is in case on-going life will be nothing but agony. The principles underlying palliative care understand "good" deaths as those which terminate lives in which dignity and the attainment of valuable "ego-ideals" are no longer possible.⁷ This conclusion does not contradict deprivation theory, but extends its reasoning to end of life care: if there can be no more good in life, then best that it end peacefully. Nevertheless, feelings which are understandable psychologically are not always philosophically justifiable. A deeper philosophical reflection upon the natural and social conditions and relationships upon which individual egos depend uncovers the possibility that death itself can be a good, that is, life-valuable, and affirmed as such, even by people who love life.

Thus, my argument is sharply at odds with positions which regard death as a reason to regard life itself as a misfortune, a harm to be avoided. The best known argument in defence of this position is David Benatar, who claims that because death is such a terrifying prospect to most people, and because it is inescapable, the thought and prospect of it is an essential reason why it would be better never to have been born.⁸ While Benatar is to be commended for defending a heterodox position that needs to be considered, his argument suffers from fatal metaphysical and normative weaknesses. First, Benatar argues that it is *better* to never be born, a position which, if universalized, implies that it is better for *no one* to ever be born, i.e., for the universe to be void of sentient life. He forgets, however, that sentience and consciousness are preconditions of there being better and worse states, and so his argument implies that it is better for there to be a universe in which "better" and "worse" are impossible, a clear contradiction.

Second — and more germane to the present argument — Benatar fails to consider the ways in which death, by making all harms finite, makes them bearable, and thus, far from being a reason to lament life, is one fundamental condition of our being able to live it well.

Benatar, like others who see death as the absolute negation of life-value,

⁷ Lars Sandman, *A Good Death: On the Value of Death and Dying*, (New York: Open University Press), 2005, p. 27.

⁸ See David Benatar, *Better Never to have Been Born*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2006, pp. 29, 77, 213; and David Benatar, "Why it is Better to Never Come into Existence," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vo. 34, No. 3, July, 1997, pp. 345-355, p. 350 esp.

tend to judge death from the perspective of the abstract individual ego mulling over its own ultimate non-existence. Such a perspective is of course not wrong, but limited. As *self*-conscious beings humans live their lives from the inside. Nevertheless, the self which distinguishes itself from the conditions in which it exists is not in reality something absolutely separate from its sustaining and supporting natural and social conditions, but rather an individuated moment of the natural resources and elements that constitute it and the social relations and institutions through which its capacities as a human agent have been developed. As McMurtry argues, “the individual is not reducible to, but grounded on . . . this life-host [which enables] self-articulation The individual achieves individuality by expressing this social life-ground in some way particular to social capacity and choice.”⁹ The key point is that self-conscious egos *develop* out of natural processes and instituted forms of social organization. Life-value develops within these networks of relation between self-conscious individuals and nature, social institutions, and other individuals and cannot be reduced to simple “pains” and “pleasures” of egos considered in the abstract. If to be self-conscious involves understanding the real conditions of the on-going life and development of the self, then self-consciousness includes consciousness of self as a member of the natural field of life-support and the social field of life-development. The fact that as members of natural fields of life-support and social fields of life-development human individuals have both life-requirements, which can be met only by drawing upon shared resources, and life-capacities, which can develop and be expressed only in interactive, interdependent relationships with others, has significant implications for the valuation of the necessity of individual death.

Life-value analysis agrees with the deprivation argument that life is good for *individuals* because they enjoy the expression of their sentient, cognitive, and creative capacities. However, life-value analysis grounds the individual who enjoys life in the natural field of life-support and the social field of life-development *outside of which no individual can exist*. It then asks individuals to re-evaluate their individual life-projects with their dependence on nature and interdependence with others in society in mind. When set within these natural and social fields of life-support and life-development, an internal limitation on the value of any individual life appears. Individual life-enjoyment

⁹ John McMurtry, *The Cancer Stage of Capitalism*, (London: Pluto), 1999, p. 89.

is internally limited by what McMurtry calls the *principle of life-coherence*. This principle asserts that life-value is not unlimited or just anything any ego happens to value, including its own on-going existence, but only that which it judges good because it “consistently enables human and ecological life together.”¹⁰ When individuals evaluate forms their lives on the basis of this principle, it becomes apparent to them that they must consider the implications of their decisions and projects for nature and other human beings. They can then recognise that it is materially irrational to call “good” goals or projects that destroy rather than maintain the natural life-support system and other human beings possibilities for living. To reject the principle of life-coherence is to selfishly equate life-value *as such* with what one happens to feel is good for one’s self in abstraction from the natural and social bases of one’s individual life.

The principle of life-coherence is an internal rather than external limitation on the life-value of individual lives and life-expressions. External limitations on the life-value of lives and life-expressions are limitations *imposed* on the individual by forces external to the individual person understood as an intrinsically valuable member of natural and social fields of life-support and life-development. A politically motivated murder, for example, is an external limitation on the life-value of the victim, because her killer treats her as a means to his own particular political ends, ends which *he* regards as of universal value but whose particularity and partiality can be demonstrated. The badness of external limitations does not lie in their being limitations, but in their being externally imposed by self-interested parties. In other words, their value cannot be universalized because the project from which they stem is not life-coherent, and it is not life-coherent because it treats the other person not as an intrinsically valuable bearer of life-value, but as nothing but a means to the self-interested ends of the perpetrator.

Internal limitations on life-value, by contrast, are those universal constitutive conditions of the maintenance, development, and enjoyment of life and life’s capacities. Internal limitations are discovered by rational reflection on the material conditions outside of which one can neither live, nor value, nor act. They are thus limitations that materially rational human beings impose upon

¹⁰ John McMurtry, “Human Rights v. Corporate Rights: Understanding Life-Value, the Civil Commons, and Social Justice,” *Studies in Social Justice*, 5(1) (Summer, 2011), p. 13.

themselves. This imposition is not regarded as an oppressive burden because the goal of materially rational human beings is not just to enjoy their own life, but to consciously craft their individual life as a contribution to good of life overall. To limit one's self to forms of capacity development which positively contribute to the health and well-being of life-support and life-development systems and others' particular lives, does not entail sacrificing the individual life-value of one's own life, but rather extending the idea of a good life beyond narrow enjoyment to include the life-value of the other lives one's projects can either enable or disable.

It is with these considerations in mind that the problem of the life-value of death can be coherently raised. In general, one's death can have life-value to the extent that through it more comprehensive life-value develops. Thus, the key to understanding the life-value of death is to judge not from the standpoint of an ego who has abstracted his or her private pleasures from his or her relationships to others and to the fields of life-support and life-development upon which he or she really depends, but from the standpoint of an ego conscious of the internal limitations on the life-value of his or her projects, goals, and experiences. Shifting the ground of individual evaluation in this way uncovers four ways in which death can have life-value. However, before examining those ways, the precise senses in which "death" and "life-value of death" will be used must be explained.¹¹

2. Two Senses of "Death" and the "Life-Value" of Death

As life-value takes both instrumental and intrinsic forms so too can death have instrumental and intrinsic life-value. However, the sense in which "death" is used differs in the two cases. In the case of instrumental life-value "death" is used in its typical biological sense to mean the permanent cessation of life. To be dead in this sense, as Overall says, is "no longer to be, or to have the possibility of being, the subject of any experience of any sort whatsoever."¹²

¹¹ There has been much work on developing a precise definition of death. The position to be explained in section two concerns less the metaphysical dimensions of the problem and more the sense of death that is presupposed by the argument that death can have life value. For the more metaphysically inclined approaches to the problem of definition see Feldman, *Confrontations with the Reaper*, pp. 56-71, Rosenberg, *Thinking Clearly About Death*, pp. 146, 195; Steven Luper, "Six Philosophical Controversies About Death," *Death and Anti-Death, Volume 1*, pp. 275-318.

¹² Christine Overall, *Aging, Death, and Human Longevity*, (Berkeley: University of California Press), 2003, p. 24.

Clearly there can be no *intrinsic* life-value to the state of being dead for the subject who has died, because he or she has permanently ceased to be an agent capable of experience and activity. Nevertheless, it is possible that *entering into* this state can have *instrumental* life-value for others as individuals and for the natural and social fields of life-support and life-development generally.

Death can also have intrinsic life-value for the one who dies. However, the meaning of the term “death” differs from the first biological meaning. In this second, existential sense, “death” refers not to the state of being dead but to the object of consciousness when one reflects upon one’s own mortality. Heidegger’s analysis of death yields the paradigmatic expression of this second sense of the term: “Death is a possibility-of-Being for Dasein which Dasein has to take over in every case. With death, Dasein stands before itself in its own most potentiality . . . in which the issue is nothing less than Dasein’s being-in-the-world.”¹³ In this existential sense, “death” is the object of thought of a human being thinking about his or her own eventual permanent demise. The existential sense of the term refers to an ever-present possibility with which we must *live*. It is only in this existential sense that death can have *intrinsic* life-value.

There are four cases in which death can have life-value. In the two less controversial cases, death has instrumental value for others who continue to live after someone else’s biological death. In the two more speculative cases which conclude the paper, death has intrinsic value *for the one who dies*. In these cases, *contra* the deprivation account, more life without limit would not extend life’s goodness without limit. The intrinsic value of life is not an inexhaustible resource for any particular individual.

3. Death’s Life-Value: Four Cases

1) Willing Self-Sacrifice

Mature human self-consciousness is aware that life is finite and must end in death.

Assume that a given life is well-furnished with life-requirement satisfiers and that its projects are life-coherent and successful. In such a case the

¹³ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, (New York: Harper and Row), 1962, p. 294.

conclusion can be drawn that this life is growing cumulatively richer in intrinsically life-valuable experiences and enjoyments and that it is contributing cumulatively more instrumental life-value to others' lives. The pure potential for life-valuable experience and enjoyment which marks the moment of birth is progressively transformed into actualised life-value, both intrinsic and instrumental. If that which is good in living is that which is life-valuable, then the more that potential life-value is converted into actual life-value, the more good there is in that life.

Since the actualization of life-value depends upon participation in natural fields of life-support and social fields of life-development, the goodness of any particular life is never a virtuoso creation, but has conditions which lie outside the individual ego. These relationships of natural dependence and social interdependence are not simply material facts about human beings, they also forge moral connections between selves in society. Of most significance for present purposes is the moral tie of reciprocity that develops out of the fact of social interdependence.

As a moral principle, reciprocity means feeling obligated to contribute back in some way to the general store of instrumental life-values from which one has drawn resources in the course of actualizing life-value. As a felt moral obligation, reciprocity is an internal limit on one's actions: it does not constrain as prison walls constrain, it orients to a desired outcome, as a sign points a traveller in the right direction. Reciprocity is the principle that underlies the first case in which death has instrumental life-value: the willingness to give up one's own life for the sake of others' lives. As each life is unrepeatable, the willingness to sacrifice one's own life for the sake of others' greater life-potential is a gift from which one can never personally benefit. One is giving back after having drawn from, for the sake of ensuring the on-going life of others with greater potential life-value left to enjoy. Instead of concentrating exclusively on the good of one's own on-going life in abstraction from the lives of others, the self *identifies* its own good *with* its capacity to contribute to the good of others' lives, even though it means the end of its own. The instrumental life-value in this case is in one sense obvious: others are able to live because one person is willing to die.

In order to unpack this conclusion, recall Nagel's claim that all of us are in for a bad end if it is true that more living is always better than the end of life. If this claim is true is *in all cases*, then it follows that it is better for individuals to

live in a society that accepts this principle, and thus supports any course of action that individuals may take, short of deliberately ending the lives of others, to preserve and extend the length of their own lives. Is this sort of a society more instrumentally life-valuable than a society in which the goodness of individual life is considered in relation to the social field of life-support in which it develops? A thought-experiment may help to answer the question.

A middle-aged person is driving a car with three small children. The car skids off the road, overturns, and catches fire. The adult has time to either free the children or himself.

Is it life-coherent to argue that it would be better for the adult to go on living if the only way that could be accomplished would be to let three children to die? To answer 'yes' would demand that it is possible for that individual to coherently justify his actions before his fellow citizens.

That account would have to prove that he owed absolutely nothing to the children he let die and that his own attachment to his personal life-value outweighed the greater potential life-value of the children. It is certainly possible to *imagine* someone making such an argument, but also that his future life would be one of unending torment as a consequence of the isolation this selfishness would surely impose. Hence it would never be life-coherent, even for someone who valued only his own life-experiences, to act in this way, because his action would condemn him to a future of scorn and ridicule. In that case, the principle of maximizing abstract individual life-enjoyment come what may for others would seem to be of *no* instrumental value at all, even to the one who tried to maximise his life-enjoyment on its basis.

On the other hand, a society in which the principle that sometimes greater life-value is created when individuals who have actualized much life-value sacrifice their future potential life-value for the sake of people who have realized comparatively little seems more instrumentally life-valuable. It thus follows that the lives of infants (pure potential life-value) and children (higher potential life-value) must always be objects of special care in a life-coherent society.

There are no conceivable situations in which it would be life-coherent to sacrifice the lives of children for the lives of adults, even if there were more adults saved than children sacrificed. Comprehensive life-value is distinct from a crude utilitarian pleasure maximization because it regards potential life-value as more precious and valuable (when hard choices have to be made) than the immediate present enjoyments lost to the dead adults. Preserving the life of

infants and children ensures that more life-value is actualized over the long-term, and is a sign of a mature moral consciousness capable of desiring the same goods for others as he or she him or herself has enjoyed. For such a mature moral consciousness it would be intolerable to go on living in the knowledge that his or her life was purchased at the cost of destroying the opportunity of the young to actualise their potential life-value.

A life-coherent society brings out the best moral characteristics of human beings: our capacity to commit ourselves as individuals to the life-value of others even though we may not be able to enjoy that life-value ourselves. Thus, when the individual can contribute to the production of more life-value by choosing to die so that more potential life-value may be actualised in others' lives, such a choice is the instrumentally life-valuable one to make. As an expression of the highest moral courage and character, such an act transforms death from a brute fact of biology to a morally beautiful contribution to the social conditions in which others with much unrealized life-potential will be able to actualize it more fully.

To conclude, it must be emphasised that the instrumental life-value here is not the brute fact that death enables someone else to live. Were it the case that instrumental life-value could be served simply by eliminating some people for the sake of others, then the argument would become life-incoherent. Life-coherence means organizing society such that the life-value of individual lives serves the life-value of others in a conscious way — that we identify our good with the individuated contribution that we make to others' lives. Though it serves the overall good, individual choice of how to contribute remains essential. That which makes self-sacrifice instrumentally life-value is that the person *willingly* sacrifices future life-value for the sake of others' greater future life-value. If people were targeted for elimination by some ruling elite and liquidated, this program would not coherently expand the range of realized life-values, but reduce all people to fungible parts of a social machine to be replaced when they have worn out. The instrumental life-value of *self*-sacrifice does not justify any sort of externally imposed sacrifice of anyone for the sake of anyone else.

The argument thus avoids the force of Overall's objection to measuring life-times in terms of realized or unrealized potential. She worries that any talk of life-time in terms of progressive expenditure of life-potential unfairly targets

the elderly as selfish consumers of resources who really just ought to die.¹⁴ By anchoring the life-value of death to the willingness and choice to die, the danger for political abuse in the name of creating “greater potential life for others” is obviated. However, an analogous problem arises, in more exigent form, in the next case, which concerns the natural deaths of older generations.

2) Valorizing New Potential Life-Value

The conversion of potential into realized life-value involves the appropriation of natural resources and the fruits of the cooperative labour of other human beings as necessary conditions for the expression and enjoyment of an individual’s life-capacities. A life-coherent pattern of appropriation requires that any given generation of human beings limit the scale of its appropriation of resources and labour to a level that is sustainable over the open and indefinite future which we presume human life as such to enjoy. While the life-time of any individual is limited, the life-time of the species is open. *Life*-coherence is not relative to the time frames of individual lives, but life itself, whose future is not limited by the *certainty* of death. Hence life-coherent forms of appropriation must ensure that resources are preserved for future generations, so long as this is materially possible.

Although he was not concerned with the problem of the life-value of death, the pioneer of ecological economics, Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen, was one of the first to grasp the problem of the life-coherent use of resources. He argued that “life-quantity may be simply defined as the sum of years lived by all individuals, past, present, and future. . . . We need no elaborate argument to see that the maximum life-quantity requires the minimum rate of natural resource depletion.

By using these resources too quickly, man throws away that part of the solar energy that will still be reaching the earth after he has departed.”¹⁵ Factoring in life-quality, as life-value analysis requires, would complicate the calculation of a life-coherent rate of resource consumption, but not to the point where it would be conceptually impossible.

The more mathematically inclined may attempt such a calculation, but it is

¹⁴ Overall, *Aging, Death, and Human Longevity*, pp. 68-74.

¹⁵ Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen, *The Entropy law and the Economic Process*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 1971, pp. 20, 22.

the principle, and not the numbers, that are central to my argument. If one values one's life as a member of natural and social fields of life-support and development, and not as an absolute abstraction to be preserved whatever the cost, one thereby obliges one's self to take into account the ways in which the length of one's life and the amount one consumes over a longer life-span impact others' life-quality. As with the case of self-sacrifice, consciousness of the principle of life-coherence enables individuals to transcend an ego-centric focus on maximal accumulation of personal property and pleasure to take account of the need of future generations for natural resources and social wealth. My point is not to insist on the need for rationing health care or to dismiss the legitimate concerns of those who suffer ill-health while young or middle age for a longer life in compensation for the time lost to illness and incapacity. Rather, my point is that it is incoherent with the needs of human life as such for a single generation to appropriate the totality of resources of the earth's life-support systems. The same argument holds for one's own life-span. Since maintaining life requires resources, life-coherent choices about how long it is good to live must take into account the consequences of such choices for as yet unborn generations.

Life-coherent decisions about the social policies that contribute to increasing the life-span of some groups in the present must take into account the life-requirements of others, both in the present and in the future. Here again, a willingness to die proves instrumentally life-valuable, not only in the obvious sense that the death of one generation creates space for newer generations to live, but more importantly in helping to cultivate habits of thought and practice in the present which aim to ensure the possibility of at least as good a future for the unborn as those who live good lives now enjoy. People cultivate healthier attitudes towards the environment, consumption habits, and the life-interests they share with other people, now and in the future.

Life-conditions may thus be improved in the present and life-support systems preserved for greater potential numbers of people in the future.

The optimal rate of life-coherent resource consumption would be that which simultaneously enables the highest total number of people to live at the highest *shared* level of life-quality enjoyment. In this way, total life-value for the species can grow if those currently alive are willing to die without expending life-incoherent amounts of resources trying to keep themselves alive for an indefinite future.

It does not follow that a life-coherent rate of resource use is, to use Overall's term, "apologistic" about the relative shortness of human life.¹⁶ Nor does it follow that each individual must accept an abstract individual duty to die after some arbitrary threshold of resource consumption has been crossed, as John Hardwig, for example, argues.¹⁷ The duty in question here is a *social* duty borne by individuals to think of themselves as members of finite fields of natural life-support and social life-development, and to make their choices about life cohere with the maximization of life-value over the open ended future of the species, of which they are a part. The realization of this duty is not incompatible with "prolongevitist" demands to increase the human life-span, *so long as everyone in the world benefits from the increase and the level of consumption it demands does not surpass the optimal rate of life-coherent resource use.*¹⁸ At that point, generational death after as full and complete a life for all as the life-coherent rate of resource consumption permits can be recognised as instrumentally life-valuable, because it encourages "the kind of behaviour that seeks to preserve and improve life beyond ourselves," both in the future and the present.¹⁹

Despite the apparent life-value of these considerations, the attempt to consider the life-interests of future generations is controversial. Overall, for example, is sceptical as to the moral value of limiting present enjoyment for the sake of future generations as yet unborn. She worries that there are metaphysical problems in ascribing a duty held by persons in the present towards people who do not yet exist.²⁰ However, these metaphysical worries stem from an illegitimate reification and abstraction of the future as some *thing* which is not yet present and therefore not real. In truth, the future for time-conscious human beings is not some *thing* that will emerge *ex nihilo* at some fixed time which is not-yet, but is seamlessly engendered by the actions present human beings take to reproduce life. Future generations are thus seamlessly engendered by present reproductive acts. The obligation to future generations is an obligation to each newborn generation of humans, extended over the open time-horizons of the species.

The first two cases of the life-value of death, while not uncontroversial, are

¹⁶ Overall, *Aging, Death, and Human Longevity*, pp. 23-63.

¹⁷ John Hardwig, *Is There a Duty to Die*, (New York: Routledge), 2000, pp. 19-36.

¹⁸ Overall, *Aging, Death, and Human Longevity*, pp. 96-7.

¹⁹ Irving Singer, *Meaning in Life*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), 2010, p. 120.

²⁰ Overall, *Aging, Death, and Human Longevity*, p. 136.

relatively concrete forms of biological death's having instrumental life-value for others, in the present and the future. The remaining two cases are more speculative. Both concern the different ways in which the existential meaning of death has intrinsic life-value for the individual who must die.

The first of this concluding set of cases concerns a necessary connection between consciousness of death and the capacity to value life-valuable things.

3) Valuing Life-Valuable Things

People can take for granted or waste things that they believe to exist in abundance. Rare and fragile things, by contrast, are cared for deeply. For centuries human beings regarded natural resources as inexhaustible, and wasted them as a consequence. While toxic effluents were pumped into the atmosphere, herculean efforts were undertaken to preserve art works. Both oxygen and art works have life-value, the first as an element that sustains life, the second as a creation that elevates human sensory experience beyond biological instrumentality. However, they are not of equally fundamental life-value, because without a breathable atmosphere we cannot live, and if we cannot live, we cannot create or experience art. Yet, until it became apparent that breathable air was not an unlimited resource, the atmosphere was not the object of explicit valuation.

The point of this contrast is to emphasise the difference between something's having life-value and people choosing to value it. As the foregoing example illustrates, the fact that a resource or creation has fundamental life-value does not entail that people will actually value it. Could this tendency to not value that which is thought to exist in abundance not also negatively affect to ability to value life-time, to the extent that its necessary finitude is ignored? The claim there is that the existential sense of death as consciousness of the end of each human life is an enabling condition of any person actually valuing the life-valuable resources, relations, goals, and activities that comprise that life.

To meditate on one's ultimate finitude is a challenging and often painful experience, and people often flee from it and live as if life-time were an absolutely abundant resource. Yet, like the earth's atmosphere and waters which used to be wasted, people who treat life-time as an absolutely abundant resource often fail to make quality use of that time. In fact, quite often people experience

the unlimited time they pretend they have (but in reality do not) as burdensome, raising problems for Nagel's contention that if life is good more life-time is *always* preferable to less. By all conventional metrics life is good when people have the means to pursue the objects of their desire. Yet, as Adorno argues, life-pursuits can become boring when living is easy. Life-time then becomes experienced as a curse, not a joy to be savoured, but empty time to be "killed." "What keeps all living things occupied and in motion is the striving for existence. With existence, however, once secured, they do not know what to do: thus the second force that sets them in motion is the striving to be rid of the burden of existence, to make it imperceptible, to "kill time," i.e., to escape boredom."²¹ Such a response would seem impossible to the extent that the real finitude and profound shortness of life were made the object of consciousness. In other words, the more one meditates on the shortness of life, the more intensely will one value the limited range of experiences, activities, and relationships that fill out one's life. Boredom will become correspondingly less of a problem.

Collectively, human beings have worked to reduce the threats to their individual survival, and in some parts of the world, for some people, have succeeded. This success means more empty time for those who can afford it. Because immediate survival pressures are relaxed, people in such propitious circumstances can think of their life-time as unlimited.

Such people feel no existential time-pressure to do one thing rather than another at any given moment. Yet the relaxation of this existential time-pressure does not motivate them to greater heights but causes them to search for ways in which consciousness of surplus time can be overcome. Thus people waste the surplus time they have, because, by ignoring their mortality, they fail to appreciate the true scarcity of life-time.

This conclusion can be supported by considering again the most commented upon literary exploration of the consequences of immortality, "The Makropulos Secret," by Karel Capek. The philosophical implications of the essential content of the narrative were examined in a famous paper by Bernard Williams.²² His

²¹ Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, (London: Verso), 2002, p. 175.

²² Karel Capek, "The Makropulos Secret," *Toward the Radical Center: A Karel Capek Reader*, Peter Kussi, ed., (North Haven, CT: Catbird Press), 1990, pp. 110-177. Bernard Williams, "The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality," *Problems of the Self*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1973, pp. 82-100.

paper is still giving rise to criticism today.²³ For Williams, the essential message of the play is that immortality would become tedious because all human beings have a determinate character, which sets open but nevertheless real limits on what we are capable of taking an interest in, learning, and doing. The protagonist of the play, Eva Makropulos, comes to regret taking the potion that makes her immortal because she ceases to be able to feel anything at all. “You are so near everything! For you, everything has meaning. For you, everything has value because for the few years that you are here, you don’t have time to live long enough,” she shouts at her mortal companion. But for her, released from the brevity of a normal life span, “Everything is so pointless, so empty, so meaningless.”²⁴ Eternal life does not enable her to love life more, it destroys her capacity to love anything at all. Ultimately, every experience becomes a repetition of earlier experiences to the point where there is simply no reason to care whether one thing or its opposite occurs. That which is valuable in finite life — achievements, beauty, relationships, goals — lose their value when the existential pressure generated by limited life-time is removed.

Now, it is true, as Overall argues against Williams’ interpretation, that literary texts do not provide knockdown arguments against the desirability of unlimited life.²⁵ Still, philosophical reflections upon literary explorations of fundamental problems that can never be fully experienced in reality can have epistemic value even if they do not yield conclusive proof of a conclusion. One can think of a literary exploration of unending life as a thought-experiment: a construction designed not to explore immortality in a literal sense, but rather *the value of finite life* by comparing it with a fictionalized immortality. The conclusion of this thought experiment is not meant to be certain, but only plausible. An analogy can be drawn between the reasons why the fictional character Eva Makropulos rejects her immortality and the reasons why actual people who treat their lifetime as unlimited tend to experience the empty time they do have as the cause of boredom.

²³ Hunter Steele, “Could Body-Bound Immortality be Liveable?” *Mind*, Vol. 85, pp. 424-427; John Martin Fischer, “Why Immortality is not So Bad,” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 2, 1994, pp. 257-270; J. Jeremy Wisniewski, “Is Immortal Life Worth Living?” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 58, 2005, pp. 27-36; Timothy Chappell, “Infinity Goes up on Trial: Must Immortality be Meaningless?” *European Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 17, 2007, pp. 30-44; Lisa Bortolotti and Yujin Nagasawa, “Immortality Without Boredom,” *Ratio*, Vo. XXII, No. 3, Sept., 2009, pp. 261-277.

²⁴ Capek, “The Makropulos Secret, pp. 173-174.

²⁵ Overall, *Aging, Death, and Human Longevity*, p. 159.

Thought together, these reasons yield insight into the intrinsic life-value of death in the existential sense by clarifying why finite life is an enabling condition helping people to value that in life which is life-valuable. Note that the claim here is *not* that death makes resources or experiences life-valuable, but rather that it is a frame which allows people to experience their scarcity, and thus to value them. Nutritious food is life-valuable whether one judges it good to eat or not. But those who value being alive and meditate on the shortness of lifetime will be more motivated to value foods which better contribute to their health so that they can be as active as possible in their finite life. Consciousness of death thus illuminates for us the field of life-value in ways that can be ignored when lifetime is not treated as a scarce resource. Hence, consciousness of death is intrinsically valuable for all who meditate upon it as the source of the drive to live well, because the opportunity to live well is unrepeatable.

It is the efforts that people make to live well that enable them to distinguish themselves as specific persons who have contributed something real and particular to the world in which they live. This contribution is the substance of the meaning of their individual lives, and, as such, the core of its intrinsic life-value. This conclusion leads to the second and arguably most important case of the intrinsic life-value of death: as a frame for individual life, it makes lives specifically meaningful wholes that have been valuable for the self and for others with whom that self has shared the world.

4) Making Life Specific, Complete, and Valuable for Others

Human beings whose fundamental natural and social life-requirements are regularly met are able to invent and choose between alternatives possibilities of experience, activity, and relationship. The wider the set of possibilities, the richer in potential life-value any individual's life is. It would thus seem to follow that a person furnished with life-requirement satisfiers over an unlimited amount of time would face a happy future of unlimited life-value potential. However, the soundness of this apparently straightforward conclusion, is not as obvious as it might first appear. Potential life-value is converted to individually unique actual life-value through the choice, in concrete contexts, from amongst the unlimited variety of ways that human sentient, cognitive, imaginative, and creative life-capacities can be realized. Life-value is not an abstraction; its reality lies in its making life worth living for definite individual people. People

become definite individuals, this or that person, with this or that character and interests, and most importantly, with this or that contribution to make to the world, through choices which permanently exclude some possibilities from being realized by virtue of the choice to pursue other options. One's identity as an individual is shaped by the choices one makes, and the choices one makes are in turn shaped by the values that one serves within the natural and social worlds in which ones live. If somehow the ultimate limiting frame of death were removed from human life, so too would the necessary condition of life's being made a uniquely life-valuable whole. "The virtue of a mortal life" write the authors of a report on the bioethical implications of life-extending technologies, "consists not so much in that it leads to death, but in that it reminds us, by its very nature, that we will someday die, and that we must live in a way that takes heed of that reality."²⁶ I will argue that it is only in the confrontation with our finitude that we can fully commit ourselves to lives which are, viewed as wholes, worth living, for self, others, and world.

Again, this claim may seem counter-intuitive from a life-value standpoint. One could reasonably argue, as Nagel and other deprivation theorists do, that death is always bad just because it prevents any particular individual from experiencing and doing everything possible. In this view, death is the height of existential injustice because it ultimately robs people of the life-enjoyment its experiences and activities generate. Would not the capacity for absolutely unlimited experience and activity result in unlimited life-enjoyment? No matter how rich and full of life-value a given mortal life is, an infinite set of possibilities will always remain unexplored. While this conclusion might be a source of psychological lament if the human good and bad is understood as nothing more than the accumulation of experience by an ego that thinks of itself in abstraction for natural fields of life-support and social fields of life-development, it is not the case that removing death as the ultimate limit on individual experience and activity would result in unlimited life-value.

If consciousness of the finitude of life — the existential sense of death — were removed from human life, so too would be the depth cause of one's having to choose between alternative paths of capacity realization be removed. In a finite life people set goals to become this or that sort of person, and they *must* make these choices, because finite life-time does not permit the exploration and

²⁶ Leon Kass et.al., *Beyond Therapy: Biotechnology and the Pursuit of Happiness: President's Council on Bioethics*, (New York: Harper Perennial), 2003, p. 186.

realization of an unlimited number of possibilities. Not all lives are as good as other lives and not everyone thinks as deeply about how they ought to live as others do. These are complex psycho-social problems that this argument cannot solve. The focus here is on the underlying onto-ethical problem for human beings: how can we learn to value the fact that since we cannot experience all that it would be possible to experience over an infinite time frame we must make choices between different life-valuable pursuits? The answer is: by accepting the fact that it is choice and limitation that constitutes our lives as *individual* and *distinct* contributions to the natural and social worlds that sustain us. As Singer argues, “not only do active creatures behave as if their immediate concerns are valuable, but also words like “good” and “bad,” “right and wrong,” “beautiful” and “ugly” — the terminology of value in general — must ultimately refer back the needs, drives, the impulses, the feelings and motives that arise from the organism’s struggle to exist Life has meaning for creatures that engage in the active preservation of their mode of existence.”²⁷ Were death somehow overcome, then people would no longer need to struggle to exist, and if they no longer needed to struggle to exist, they would no longer need to make evaluative choices between different possibilities. Such lives would be insipid, devoid of meaning because they would be devoid of the limitations that force mortals to reflect upon different possibilities for action: which course is better, which is worse, which is good, which is bad, which is right, which is wrong.

If this deepest material-existential reality of human life — being finite members of natural and social fields of life-support — is ignored in favour of an abstract ego-centrism in which the self is driven only by its desire to accumulate as much pleasurable experience for itself as possible, human beings become blind to the natural, social, and moral ties that link our lives to the planet and the lives of others. If one acts as if one has no need of others and that others have no need of oneself then one is saying that others have no value to oneself, but also, that *one has no value to others*. Even if one can bear this deep purposelessness, there is a further negative consequence that cuts closer to the heart of the egoist: if all possibilities for living were open to everyone over an unlimited time frame, and everyone sought to maximise their experiences and activities, the more everyone would tend to become the same. The longer such lives went on, the less individuated would materially distinct people would become. The

²⁷ Singer, *Meaning in Life*, pp.88-9.

specificity of individual life would tend to be eroded along with the drive to make contributions to others' lives that comes along with consciousness of one's *self* as a finite member of natural fields of life-support and social fields of life-development.

Makropulos' lament discussed above supports this claim. She realized that life-experience extended over too long a time collapses the specificity of an individual life into an unbearable grey uniformity. Elimination of death as the limiting frame on life-activity causes her to cease caring about what sort of person her choices show her to be. The example makes it plausible to argue that lives that no longer had to confront the finitude that death imposes would lose the necessary condition that currently encourages people to expend real effort to make intelligently discriminating choices between better and worse forms of life. Finitude generates purpose because the needs and vulnerabilities it entails link us together and force us to differentiate between actions which are of ultimate importance (those which enable the expression and enjoyment of life-value) and those which are not ('time-killing' in Adorno's sense above).

When one consciously lives one's life within the finite frame that death imposes, the primary goal of life becomes to express, enjoy, and create as much life-value as possible. For socially self-conscious finite agents, aware of their dependence on nature and interdependence with others in society, this goal is not exclusionary and selfish, but inclusively life-coherent. Such an agent cares about the natural and social worlds in which he or she lives, and therefore about the other people who share that world, because he or she understands that his or her private experiences depends upon the degree and depth to which nature and society are able to satisfy his or her life-requirements. Consequently, the actions one enjoys as an individual is always life-coherent action. Life-coherent action is defined by conformity with the principle of life-coherence discussed above. Any project is life-coherent that makes individual life meaningful and valuable by virtue of the contribution it makes to maintaining and improving the natural and social worlds to which everyone, including the agent, belongs.

When individuals enjoy the projects through which they individuate themselves by contributing to the life-value of the natural and social worlds they share with others, the opposition between distinct individuals and between individuals and social institutions as perceived limits on individual freedom and happiness is overcome. The dissolution of the *opposition* between people is not at the same time the dissolution of the *differences* between them. On the contrary,

more comprehensive satisfaction of life-requirements increases the life-valuable differences between people by enabling them to pursue their own self-development more comprehensively. “Comprehensive” does not mean “boundless,” and the limitations that stand in the way of any person’s having a boundless variety of experiences are what distinguish one person from another. Realized actions within the necessary imitations of finite life make people distinct individuals whose lives, become whole through death, are subject to evaluation. Living a life that is the object of evaluation is the very essence of living a meaningful life. A life that was truly meaningless would be a life that no one else was even conscious of ever having been lived, because it had absolutely no effects on anyone or the world.

Life becomes whole for each person through death. Once death has occurred the person can no longer edit and revise their character or the contributions that they have made to the world of nature and other people. Those contributions become a matter of public record and an invitation for others to think about the life now passed, but also their own in reflected light of other lives. Living with consciousness of death enables people to project their lives as a potential whole while they are still living, for the sake of self-critical evaluation, which in turn affords them chances to revise goals, renew efforts, and deepen commitments. If people block consciousness of death through living moment to moment for the sake of idiosyncratic individual pleasures alone, then they run the soul-destroying danger that Ivan Ilyich discovers to his horror once he is forced to confront his mortality: that everything he had served in life was wrong. “It struck him that those scarcely detected inclinations to fight against what the most highly placed people regarded as good . . . might have been the real thing . . . and his professional duties, and his ordering of his life, and all his social . . . interests . . . might all have been false. . . . He saw plainly that it was all . . . a horrible monstrous lie. . . . This consciousness increased his physical suffering tenfold.”²⁸ In order to avoid Ilyich’s fate people must reflect upon the deep value commitments their lives as a whole serve while they are alive and capable of changing them if found wanting, because there will come a moment where it is no longer possible to change course. Rather than die in fear that one has left the most important elements out of life, one can die and cede one’s place to others confident in the knowledge that one’s contributions have been

²⁸ Leo Tolstoy, “The Death of Ivan Ilyich,” *The Death of Ivan Ilyich and Other Stories*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin), p. 157.

life-valuable. As Ron Aronson reflects, “Am I a good father? Friend? Mate? Citizen? Am I living fully? Am I making good use of my abilities? Am I acting morally? Am I acting to make the world a better place? These are only a few of the self-judgement questions that we ask frequently. Dying . . . injects into them the urgency of a life that is irreversible and final.”²⁹

Ultimately the life-value of death comes down to making each moment of life urgent. A life without death would be a life without urgency, the endless accumulation of experiences of no value to anyone else outside one’s own skin. By imposing absolute limits, death makes life the object and subject of the ultimate and highest value. In making people conscious of life’s ultimate and highest value, death imposes on people the demand to never waste time but to remain constantly engaged in life-valuable activities when they are active. To treat *life* — not one’s own particular life exclusively — as of ultimate and highest value means to act so as to ensure that the natural and social worlds human beings share enable everyone’s life-capacities as fully as possible over the open ended future of human existence. In this way the mortal individual is able to give shape and meaning to her or his own existence and to transcend the finitude of their organic life through the permanent contributions they make to the life-support and life-development systems that live on after they have died.

²⁹ Ronald Aronson, *Living Without God* (San Francisco: Counterpoint), 2009, p. 173.