Abstracts

Kathy Behrendt  ‘A special way of being afraid: fear of death as such’

I am interested in fear of one’s own death taken as fear of non-existence, nothingness, or as it is sometimes called, fear of death as such. This form of fear has been denied or downplayed by some philosophers. Philosophy of the emotions has particular trouble in dealing with it, granting it a status that is simultaneously paradigmatic yet anomalous with respect to fear in general. My paper documents these matters, and considers a number of responses. I defend the existence of fear of death as such against the deniers and detractors. I then look at the success that cognitive theories of the emotions have had in dealing with other “problematic” fears, such as phobias, and I examine the extent to which the solutions garnered here fail to apply to fear of death as such. The problem lies with the perceptual-centred model of fear that is typically called upon by cognitive theorists to explain fear in general. Against this I recommend a retreat to a belief-centred model for fear of death as such. This has been thought to be an untenable model for fear in general, so resorting to it may confirm the anomalous status of fear of death. But I argue that there are other fears that are better explained by a belief-centred rather a perceptual-based approach. This reinforces the plausibility of that approach, and goes some way to alleviating the anomalous and problematic status of the fear of death as such.

Chris Belshaw  ‘Brains and biology’

What is death? I opt for a familiar view: it is the irreversible breakdown in the organism as whole. Death is univocal: it comes, in its literal sense, to all and only organisms. There are several objections to this biological account of what death is. Many of the most important insist that talking of our death, or of human death, is special. It is claimed that such deaths link with the ending of a psychology. These objections, seriously hostile to a biological account, are not considered in any detail. Instead I focus on interpretations of and objections to the biological account which go wrong, as I claim, in giving a too elevated status to just one organ, the brain.

An objection to the familiar view is that death isn’t univocal. For human death is defined in terms of the death of the brain. This claim isn’t easy to defend. Easier, and more popular, is the view that brain death is the criterion of human death. But this view too has its weaknesses. And I argue:

1. Brain death isn’t sufficient for death. An organism can be brain dead but still alive. Consider actual cases – the pregnant woman on life-support; and possible cases – the recipient of a brain transplant.

2. Brain death isn’t necessary for death. An organism can be dead even though its brain, or a significant part of its brain, is still alive. Again consider actual and possible cases: a living but detached monkey’s head; a brain stem in a vat.
Lisa Bortolotti  ‘Death and the Value of Human Agency’

Kafka is reported to have said that the meaning of life is that it stops. Contemporary philosophers and bioethicists have also argued that a life with no end would lose meaning and would cease to have the value that we attribute to a distinctively human life. Although these arguments are influential, and presented in the popular press and in fiction as well as in academic contexts, they rarely spell out what it is that gives value to human life and that would be irremediably lost if we could significantly extend the life span or even become immortal. In this paper I want to clarify the agency objection to extending the human life span, and argue that, even if we accept that being constrained is a defining feature of human agency that adds to its value, the postponement or removal of death would not affect this source of value and meaning. Living longer would make some choices easier, but would also present new challenges to any human agent.

Mikel Burley ‘Immortality and Meaning: Reflections on the Makropulos Debate’

This paper offers some reflections upon the debate between Bernard Williams and his critics concerning the desirability or meaningfulness of (embodied) immortal life. After sketching Williams’ argument for the necessary undesirability of immortality, I outline some considerations adduced by Timothy Chappell in support of the opposing view. I highlight the reliance of both Williams and Chappell on assumptions about human nature: for Williams, the categorical desires that propel us through life are non-contingently finite and exhaustible, whereas for Chappell they are not (or need not be). It looks, then, as though there is an underlying issue of how to distinguish between contingent and non-contingent characteristics of human lives, and yet neither side in the debate provides a clear way of settling this issue.

A related problem is the muddying of the debate by the employment of underdescribed imaginative scenarios: we are typically invited to imagine an immortal life that includes enjoyable features of ordinary finite lives, yet tend not to be told which features of the world are to be held stable. Utilizing Hunter Steele’s distinction between necessary and contingent forms of immortality, I outline some of the difficulties surrounding attempts to make intelligible the concept of a life that is both human, or at least human-like, and endless.

I conclude that, although the salient issues in the debate over the desirability of immortality require further attention, the considerations I have brought forward suggest that this debate has yet to be placed on a clearly intelligible footing.

Havi Carel ‘More is not better than less: Epicurean responses to deprivation theory’

Epicurus provided one of the most salient accounts of why we should not fear our own death. On his view, “where death is, I am no longer and where I am, death is not” (Letter to Menoeceus). So long as we are alive, death is nothing to us. And once we are dead, we are no longer there to feel anything, fear included. If we think about it carefully, said Epicurus, we will realise that what we are really afraid of is not death but dying, the pain of illness and decay. There is nothing to fear in death itself, because death is a state of non-existence. It is incoherent to fear not existing, because non-existence is simply not being: how can it be feared?

This view has been criticised by deprivation theorists such as Thomas Nagel, who argue that there are good reasons to fear our own death. Being deprived of future goods – as happens when one dies, Nagel argues – is a bad thing and it is rational to fear it. Moreover, Nagel argues that life is itself a good (independently of the good things it may contain) and that like other goods, ceteris paribus, having more of it is better than having less.

In this paper I defend Epicurus’ view against deprivation theorists by responding to three of Nagel’s main arguments. I conclude the paper by presenting the reasonableness and practical advantages of the Epicurean position. The Epicurean account is still, both rationally and practically, the best attitude towards our own death. The convergence of the rational and the practical is itself a further indication of the strength of this position.
Tim Chappell ‘Immortality and identity’
I will reply to Mikel Burley's interesting and ingenious critique of both sides in the continuing Makropoulos debate. I will go on to add to that debate some further thoughts about the importance of the notion of personal identity to our views about immortality.

Tom Cochrane ‘The fear of death and its sublime consolation’
I examine the fear of death from the perspective of an embodied view of emotions which regards bodily changes and the feelings of those changes as essential to emotions, rather than conceptual judgements or appraisal. Based on this view I argue that the fear of death accurately presents the vulnerability of one’s body. Nevertheless, the imaginative activity that triggers the fear is irrational. Since the embodied theory is sceptical of the power of reasoning to control emotions, by way of practical consolation I suggest the cultivation of alternate emotional responses. These alternatives are all varieties of the aesthetic experience of the sublime. One can celebrate the enduring existence of the universe after one’s death, the heroic struggle to endure and even the intensity of the fear of death itself.

Matthew Hanser ‘Where’s the harm in dying?’
In this talk I will criticize ‘state-based’ accounts of harm—those according to which suffering harm is a matter of being in, being put into, or being caused to have been in a certain sort of bad state—and defend a rival ‘event-based’ account, according to which suffering harm is a matter of undergoing an event that is bad for one simply in virtue of being the sort of event that it is, quite independently of the badness of any associated state. I will also explore the event-based account’s implications for puzzles surrounding the harm of death.

Steve Holland ‘A quandary about death’
The bioethical debate about death centres on the normative question as to how we ought to treat human beings in certain rare conditions who are potential sources of relatively scarce transplant organs. These include anencephalics, the permanently vegetative, and the brain dead. One response is that we should treat such people according to whether they are alive or dead, as those concepts are ordinarily understood. But our ordinary concept of death is non-univocal in the sense that it runs together two ideas, namely, irreversible loss of organismic functioning and irreversible loss of the capacity for consciousness. The paper presents arguments in support of this analysis, which is clarified and defended by being juxtaposed with other non-univocal accounts of death (i.e., dualistic accounts, the view that death is a cluster concept, and the disaggregation view). The practical implication of the conceptual analysis recommended in this paper is that the human beings central to the bioethics of death—including anencephalics, the permanently vegetative, and the brain dead—are in a sense alive and in a sense dead, according to our ordinary concepts. But this puts us in a quandary about how they should be treated. More generally, the dead donor rule—i.e., the principle that it is impermissible to retrieve transplant organs from living patients—is redundant in these, the very cases for which it was devised. Hence, the conceptual analysis of death recommended in the paper counts for particularism and against generalism in life-ending ethics.

Jens Johansson ‘Temporalism about death’s badness’
According to the deprivation approach to the evil of death, a person’s death is bad for her insofar as it deprives her of goods that she would have enjoyed if she had continued to live. This view faces the following Epicurean problem: When is death bad for its victim? On the most fruitful interpretation, this question challenges us to specify a time at which the person is worse off than she would have been if her death had not occurred. I argue that there is no moment, but many periods of time at which she is worse off. And I argue that this is all we need in order to meet the challenge.
Steven Luper ‘Suicide’

When living on is against our interests, it can be reasonable to end our lives, preferably with the help of a medical expert. Assistance in the form of euthanasia is justifiable as well, especially for people who are too incapacitated to take their own lives. I will not discuss euthanasia (but I am not worried about the ‘slippery slope’ to euthanasia, since I’ve already taken the slide). Instead I will argue that suicide and assisting in suicide are not directly wrong. To do so I will consider what I take to be the strongest accounts of when killing is directly wrong, and show that none of them give us reason to think that suicide and assisting in suicide are impermissible. I will also discuss the strongest argument for the claim that neither is permissible. This argument appeals to the view that people have intrinsic value as subjects. But to rule out suicide and assisted suicide, their subject value must be considerable. In fact, opponents of suicide and assisted suicide say that it is absolute, in the sense that it outweighs all other sorts of value, including their own welfare.

Eric Olson ‘The Epicurean View of Death’

The Epicurean view is that there is nothing bad about death: it is never in any way bad for one to die. The view is normally dismissed on the grounds that the arguments for it are poor. But it is often unclear just what the view is. I distinguish several different Epicurean views, some harmless, some implausible, and some incredible. I focus on the one that seems most interesting and try to work out what it means. I argue that the view is so much at odds with so much of our ordinary thinking that it is hard to understand. The more we think about the Epicurean view, the more mysterious it becomes.

Carolyn Price ‘The rationality of grief’

A flourishing human life involves deep emotional commitments to others, and so carries the risk of bereavement and grief. Yet grief has often been viewed as a destructive, futile, or irrational emotion. Here I focus on the charge of irrationality, as framed by Donald Gustafson (1989). According to Gustafson, grief combines two incompatible attitudes:

1. The belief that the subject has suffered an important and irrevocable loss
2. The desire that this should not be the case.

Gustafson argues that, since the desire evidently cannot be satisfied, it is irrational. On his account, this form of irrationality is an inherent and so inevitable feature of grief.

I offer a partial defence of grief against Gustafson’s charge. My defence rests on two elements. First, I offer an alternative model of emotion, which presents emotions as complex episodes, initiated by emotional appraisals. Secondly, I appeal to John Bowlby’s account of grief (Bowlby, 1980) to argue that grief is a complex emotional process involving two forms of sadness, ‘anguish’ and ‘desolation’, which Gustafson’s analysis runs together. Against this background, I concede that anguish does involve an element of irrationality. However, this irrationality is not internal to the emotion itself, but arises from a conflict between emotion and belief: in anguish, the subject believes that their loss is irreparable, but does not yet feel that it is so. In contrast, desolation need involve no irrationality: it is a wholly appropriate response to bereavement, in which grieving subjects are prompted to reflect on, and so come to understand, the nature of their loss.

David Pugmire ‘Against Supermouse’

This paper explores the importance to life of the fact that it has a limited duration and can be recognised as having this. Mortality is not just an appalling biological contingency visited on life. This claim is approached by examining the differences that would be made to life by its indefinite prolongation. These might indeed include liberation from a sense of dismaying fleetingness and ignominious brevity as well as the lifting of the dread of personal extinction. This paper concentrates, however, on countervailing costs: problems of identity from the lack of settled structure and the accruing experiential inaccessibility of most of one’s life; and it considers difficulties over attachment and agency. All these are inimical if not to life then to the good life. Ramifications for our emotions about death are touched on at the end.
**Patrick Stokes  ‘Duties to the Dead? Kierkegaard’s Phenomenology of Remembrance’**

Whilst there is an extensive literature on the possibility of posthumous harms, less has been said regarding the corresponding question of how we can have positive duties to the dead if the dead are regarded as no-longer-existent. This question poses a challenge to many of our practices of grieving, remembrance and commemoration – things we ostensibly do for the dead. The problem also haunts Kierkegaard’s controversial ethical treatise *Works of Love*, in which he claims that we have a duty to recollect the dead while insisting that the deceased person is an absolutely non-existent “no one.” I argue that, despite what both sympathetic and hostile commentators have claimed, this “duty” to recollect the dead is neither metaphorical nor (to use Kant’s distinction) a duty regarding the dead that is properly a duty to the living. Kierkegaard does genuinely think that the dead are legitimate objects of love and ethical duty even though they no longer exist (a status he also extends to as-yet-non-existent infants). I draw on this and other texts to show that, for Kierkegaard, non-existent beings such as the dead can become “neighbours” (moral patients) via a mode of contemplation in which we become phenomenally present with the deceased. As an account of how we experience the dead as objects of moral duty without positing their posthumous survival, Kierkegaard’s phenomenology of recollection therefore seems to have intriguing things to say to philosophers grappling with posthumous harms and related questions.

**Chris Wareham  ‘Death, Betrayal, and the Timing of Relational Harms’**

Epicurus argued that there is no time at which death can be said to harm the person who dies. Before death, there is no apparent harm because the person is alive and enjoying the goods of life. Once death has occurred, there is no person to be harmed, since she has ceased to exist as a subject of harm. Epicurus’s argument presents serious difficulties for what Steven Luper has called the “harm thesis” – the common view that death and posthumous events can harm the person who dies. If ordinary harms occur at a particular time, and the harm of death and posthumous harms do not, Epicureans can justifiably accuse proponents of the harm thesis of introducing an *ad hoc* category of timeless harms to accommodate the harm of death. This would provide strong grounds for rejecting the claim that death harms the person who dies. I argue that the harm thesis can be rescued by holding that the harm of death and posthumous harms are, like betrayal, harms of a purely relational type. They are harming events and states of affairs that involve no real changes in the condition of the *ante-mortem* harmed person. Since this is so, the most plausible response to Epicurus is to claim that the harm occurs at the time that the harming events and states of affairs occur. That is, I claim that death and posthumous events harm a person *after death.*