

BRITISH HUMANIST ASSOCIATION

DEATH, DYING AND MEANING

Trainer's Course Book

2012 Prepared for SPES and BHA by Peter Cave
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The fear of death is more to be dreaded than death itself.
Publius Syrus

There are worse things in life than death. Have you
ever spent an evening with an insurance salesman?
Woody Allen

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Tutor notes for Death, Dying and Meaning

The course consists of four sessions which are self-explanatory.

The material for the course – nearly 19,000 words – may, of course, be used in various different ways. Possibly the best approach is for tutors to read the material beforehand and decide upon which areas they wish to focus – and then use some of the quotations, by way of OHP, visualizer, powerpoint or the latest gadgets, for the students to discuss, after short presentation of the issues, using the material provided.

The relevant session's course material could be given to the students after the session – as an aid to reviewing the session and for further questions for it is unlikely a session would cover all the material. Of course, the material could be handed to students before the sessions, so that the students are prepared to present their own reactions to the topics and the questions.

Probably the best collection of relevant readings is the one by Hanfling, given on the reading list.

For discussion of ethical theories, see the books by Richard Norman, for example, his *The Moral Philosophers*. For philosophical puzzles including some concerning religion, ethics and death, see the 'perplexing philosophy puzzle' books by Peter Cave; some of the material is drawn from those books as well as his *Humanism* book.

The main topics raised in each session are:

1. What's so bad about death?

The nature of death – annihilation and non-existence;
Surviving as the same person over time;
Death as a harm – assessment of the argument of Lucretius;
What do you lose through death?
The harm of dying young.

2. Ending lives

Some case studies of suicide/euthanasia;
Some distinctions: epistemic/metaphysical; legal/moral;
The sanctity of human life: the right to life / the right to death;
Hume on suicide;
Mill's Liberty Principle and respect for individuals' autonomy;
Slippery slope arguments;
Euthanasia and palliative care.

3. Respecting the dying and the deceased

How we do respect the dead;
Lucretius argument re 'no harms when dead';
How to be harmed even when dead;
Betrayal example / Kafka's request example;
Respecting euthanasia requests – binding ourselves in the future;
Non-voluntary euthanasia / organ donation etc.

4. Death and the meaning of life

'What's the point?' Eternal life solves nothing;
Valuing both ends and means;
'We are but specks in the universe';
Non-existence before birth: a mirror to death;
Drinking the elixir of life – the need for death;
Perspectives on life.

Seminar One: What's so bad about death?

*When death is there, we are not;
when we are there, death is not*
(Epicurus)

1. Introduction

Death affects all of us, both directly and indirectly. We all suffer as a result of the death of loved ones, friends, colleagues – even of figures with whom we have no personal attachment. And most of us are, at least at times, highly sensitive to the thought that one day we ourselves shall die. Death is arguably the most significant event in our lives.

2. What is death?

Discussion:

1. Before your thinking is corrupted by what philosophers have said, what do you think happens after death?
-

2.1 The Humanist impulse

On the one hand, many people believe that death here on earth is not the end of life for the deceased: they believe there is an afterlife. (Although it is possible to believe in afterlives and reincarnations without belief in God or gods, usually they go together.) On the other hand, humanists typically believe that death is complete annihilation. Why do humanists believe that? Well, there is considerable evidence that links conscious life to brain activity. We have no good reason to believe that, once the brain is destroyed, there can be any form of conscious life for that individual – and, indeed, once the body has disintegrated, there is no form of life at all for that individual.

Yes, some humanists have occasionally spoken of 'experiences after death', but they usually recognize that that is a fancy way of speaking for when the heart has stopped, but some brain activity continues. A. J. Ayer a former president of the British Humanist Association, reported such experiences (he met 'the masters of the universe') when aged 78; he was in hospital for pneumonia. In the end, the experiences did not change his belief that death is annihilation and that there is no God.

2.2 The Religious Impulse

Death, of course, has particular significance for religious believers. Most religious believers possess faith, one way or another, and many believe or hope that death is not annihilation of the individual (or at least not always, or not in the case of themselves or their loved ones). Religious believers usually understand death as a special event in an individual's eternal existence, whether a post-death existence that is personal – living on in heaven or hell or something in between – or a post-death existence that is mysteriously subsumed into a divine eternal infinite being.

There is an immediate implausibility in such beliefs concerning an afterlife, especially when bearing in mind that many believers provide details (conflicting ones) of how post-death life will be, details based on various

interpretations of various ancient texts deemed 'holy' and the 'word of God'. How do they know? There is also some doubt about whether we should hope for such an eternal life, a topic to which we shall turn in the third and fourth seminars. More fundamentally, there exist the metaphysical puzzles of what sense (if any) can be made of a personal disembodied existence or even an existence that is tied to bodily resurrection.

The metaphysical puzzles above raise questions of what it is to be the 'same' person through time. These puzzles are relevant both to how to integrate a meaningful life with death (discussed in the last session), and how to make sense, if possible, of any post-death existence.

3. How to survive

In order to gain a grip on whether an afterlife is even possible, we need to have some idea of what it is to continue as the same person.

Discussion:

2. What makes you the same person over time?
-

3.1 What makes someone the same person over time?

The question is tricky: philosophers continue to debate over the question. We may be inclined to say something about continuity of body – having the same body over time – but we know that the body undergoes radical changes. Even organ and limb and face transplants can occur. Sometimes this pushes people to the thought that it is having the same brain that makes you the same person over time; but the brain is part of the body and also undergoes radical changes – and it looks as if in time brain tissue additions and subtractions may be made, yet the person will remain the same person.

A different answer stresses the importance of some continuity in psychology – memory, character, hopes and projects. After all, we do seem able to make sense of waking up, finding ourselves with a different body. (Think of stories, such as Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, where Gregor awakes as a gigantic insect or the many children's stories where a character is turned into a dragon, a mouse or something, but with the same thoughts and feelings.) The psychological answer, though, needs to deal with the fact that I may lose my memory to greater or lesser degrees, yet it may still be 'me'. Suppose you are being tortured day in, day out. Suppose the torturer takes pity on you and says that he will wipe your memory from tomorrow, but will still torture you. Would you not end up undergoing pain tomorrow, even though you would not know who you were?

Whichever answer or combination of answers that we go for, there are difficulties for any supposed afterlife living. Here are three options.

3.2 Three options

Your being bodily resurrected

If eternal life is achieved by body resurrection, then we have the questions of at what age the body is resurrected for the eternal existence. Bear in mind, if it is the earlier youthful body, then the atoms of that body may well now partly constitute other people's bodies. Further, how does your body continue to survive, a body maybe with an addled liver, a tricky heart and greying hairs – and, if without such defects, how does it keep going eternally perfectly and still be you?

Your personal disembodied existence

If eternal life is a matter of disembodied existence, then what could such a life be like *for you*, without your desires associated with the physical, without any physical dimension and so forth? What would your life be like, disembodied, if your earthly life revolved round gardening or golfing, or the delights of wine-tasting, mountaineering and love-chasing? Without a body, how would you communicate with others?

Your existence as impersonal

Some religious believers suggest that the afterlife is an impersonal existence. Then, of course, it is completely baffling what that would be like, if *like* anything at all. Why could it matter to you, to continue existing for an eternity, yet with no sense of its being you?

Many religious believers speak of the *soul* continuing; but – even if we can make sense of the soul being an entity distinct from your mind and psychological states – the continuing existence of your soul is of little comfort to you, if you lack all sense of yourself continuing. As Aristotle comments, an individual typically

desires his own life and safety, especially that of his rational part; because for the good man existence is good, and everyone wishes his own good – nobody would choose to have all the good things in the world at the price of becoming somebody else..., but while only remaining himself, whatever he is.

3.3 Humanists and no afterlife

Humanists do not have such afterlife puzzles for, of course, they do not accept that there is any afterlife. Death just is what is written on the tin: death, annihilation, the end of the individual. To quote from a Monty Python sketch, the parrot has ceased to be and is no more. True, there is a decaying corpse – or later on, scattered ashes – but that is not the person continuing to exist.

Discussion:

3. What do you think is the difference between a living person and the person's corpse (or ashes)?
-

Your obvious answer almost certainly will have something to do with consciousness or the potential for consciousness. That is, there is something *that it is like* to experience the world for a person, a viewpoint, a perspective, whereas we cannot get a grip on the corpse having a viewpoint or perspective on the world.

4. Is death undesirable?

Let us assume that death is indeed annihilation. What valuation or lack of valuation can we give it? More easily expressed: is death a harm for you? Our natural belief is that death is a harm; it is typically undesirable – though sometimes it may be the lesser of two harms.

Discussion:

4. Do you think that death is a harm?
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4.1 Death as a harm?

On the one hand, when life is going well for individuals, death strikes most of us as obviously undesirable. After all, something that is going well ought not to be brought to an end – well, so we may think. On the other hand, when things are going badly for individuals, death may then seem highly desirable.

A sharp 'black or white' approach as the above requires qualifications. You may want to take into account the effects of your death on loved ones. And when things are going badly, well, they may be but a prelude, even an incentive, for life-giving changes in which things improve; death is not the sole means of escape from the bad. Mind you, even when things are going well, the thought may occur to us, 'One can have too much of a good thing.' Good things need to come to an end to retain their quality of desirability. Well, is that true?

With life – and death – in mind, you may feel that there is a sufficient variety of goods to ensure that at any stage of life, too much of *that* good thing, does not mean that there is yet too much of *this*. You may also recognize, though, that the time can come – through illness and incapacity, through suffering and pain and

emptiness – when death is the only way left to overcome such bad things. It may then be the lesser of two evils.

It is like nothing at all to be a tree, a pebble or an old shoe –
and it is like nothing at all to be a corpse.

Remember, we are talking of death. Our question is not one of whether dying is a harm. Dying may well be painful and undesirable; but the question is whether the state to which it leads is undesirable. We put up with many discomforts for they are means to beneficial outcomes. We may struggle through examinations, airports and releasing the cork – all for the pleasure of the promotion, the holiday and the champagne. With death, though, we do not so much get over the painfulness of dying; rather, we cease to be around to need to get over anything at all. What is so fearful about dying, for many people, is that it leads to death and to the state of being dead – and nothing. We may, for example, simply like to know how things work out for the universe.

4.2 Accepting death

Discussion:

5. How should you view things as being, when you are dead?
-

Sometimes people fear the nothingness of death, the blankness of death, because they have the idea that they will experience the nothingness; but, of course, that is a mistake. There is a big difference between being nothing and being something that experiences nothingness. Death is sometimes likened to an eternal sleep – but, presumably, without the dreams and certainly without any subsequent awakenings, romantic or otherwise.

A fine example of an acceptance of death is that of the humanist David Hume, the philosopher and Enlightenment figure of the eighteenth century. Hume was described by some as 'the Great Infidel', by others as '*le bon David*'. We shall meet him in subsequent sessions. Adam Smith, the great economist, described in a letter how *le bon David* approached his death.

He had now become so very weak, that the company of his most intimate friends fatigued him; for his cheerfulness was still so great, his complaisance and social disposition were still so entire, that when any friend was with him, he could not help talking more, and with greater exertion, than suited the weakness of his body.

Letter to Adam Smith from David Hume's doctor

Edinburgh, Monday, 26th August, 1776. .

DEAR SIR,—Yesterday, about four o'clock, afternoon, Mr. Hume expired. The near approach of his death became evident in the night between Thursday and Friday, when his disease became excessive, and soon weakened him so much that he could no longer rise out of his bed... He never dropped the smallest expression of impatience; but when he had occasion to speak to the people about him, always did it with affection and tenderness. ... When he became very weak, it cost him an effort to speak, and he died in such a happy composure of mind, that nothing could exceed it.

Indeed, if death is complete annihilation, why should it be feared? Once deceased, you are not around to experience anything at all. True, you may be concerned about how loved ones or others may cope without us, but that is a concern about whether they are harmed through your death; but are you harmed? And if you are not harmed by death, others ought not to be distressed by your death *for your sake* – though they may be distressed for their sake; they may simply miss you.

The thought that death is no harm for the deceased has found expression in the thoughts of Epicurus, Lucretius and others who deny any form of afterlife.

5. Death is not to be feared

The aphorism heading this session, 'When death is there, we are not; when we are there, death is not,' was given by Epicurus, of 4th century BC Greece. His follower, Lucretius, a Roman, writing in the first century BC, offered some arguments for the claim that death is not to be feared.

5.1 Lucretius's argument

If the future holds travail and anguish in store, the self must be in existence, when that time comes, in order to experience it. But from this fate we are redeemed by death, which denies existence to the self that might have suffered these tribulations. Rest assured, therefore, that we have nothing to fear in death. One who no longer is cannot suffer, or differ in any way from one who has never been born.

- Lucretius, *On the Nature of the Universe*

The motive behind the argument was unhappiness with the way in which religion and superstitious beliefs about afterlives can corrupt our everyday living. Religions may make us feel bleak and fearful about an afterlife; they may lead us into obsessive behaviour. Epicurus and Lucretius sought to encourage us to accept that there is nothing to be feared by death.

There are two big assumptions being made by Lucretius.

AA: Once death has occurred, the deceased individual no longer exists as a subject of experiences. That is the Annihilation Assumption.

EA: An event can be good or bad for individuals only if they exist at the time of the event, as subjects of possible experiences. That is the Existence Assumption.

Hence, once deceased, nothing can be good or bad for the individuals so deceased. Here is now another assumption:

IA: It is irrational to fear events unless they are bad for you – the Irrational Assumption.

Given the assumptions, we may conclude that it is irrational for us to fear being dead – and once we see that, we ought to let our fear subside. Of course, that is easier said than done; but it is possible for fears to slip away, once we understand them to be baseless. You may be scared of the 'snake' in the corner; but when it is pointed out to you that it is just a twig, all may be transformed in your emotional life, at least just then.

Discussion:

6. What do you make of the argument? After all, when we are asleep, things can harm us
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5.2 Challenges to Lucretius

One challenge to the argument is that it speaks of events and states *after* death not harming the individuals concerned; but that does not show that dying and the event of death are not harmful and to be feared. Let us make the discussion easier by relating it to an individual who dies – let him be Oscar.

5.2.1 We may simply insist that the above argument somehow misses out the important fact that death is bad for Oscar simply because he has lost any future living. Now, obviously, many people have had enough of life and do not want to continue; but our Oscar was a happy man, with much happiness ahead, if only he could live longer. He was aware of the impending loss – and that distressed him and was bad for him. But, in response to that line of reasoning, Lucretius may challenge with the question, 'Quite what loss is Oscar fearing?'

Before we turn to that question, let us stay more directly with Lucretius's argument, for he will insist that once Oscar is dead, nothing matters to him – whether he has or has not lost life – for he no longer is. For Oscar to be harmed by death, he needs to exist; but death is his extinction, his lack of existence – and that is an end of it (literally). Oscar on his deathbed, you may reply, is about to lose something, namely, a future life. Lucretius may respond that that is not a loss, for he does not yet of course have that future life – and when it is allegedly a loss for him is precisely when it cannot be so, for then he fails to exist.

5.3 What do you lose through death?

Discussion:

7. Surely you lose something in death. For example, has not someone who dies young been harmed more than – lost more than – someone who dies old?
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The Cambridge philosopher and humanist Frank Plumpton Ramsey died at the age of twenty-six; Keats died at the age of twenty five. Did they not lose out on something that (say) Sibelius and Hobbes did not? Sibelius died at the age of ninety-one and Thomas Hobbes at the age of eighty-six.

We may point out how Oscar, maybe dying now, at the age of sixty – or even more so – at the age of thirty – is losing out on years that he could have had. Indeed, we may believe that is true with regard to however long he lives. But for the ways of the world, of aging and cell destruction and accidents, we all could live or have lived much longer – and we may want to have and could have had very happy extra years. The last session will discuss the value or otherwise of immortality, of endless living; but here, we can readily recognize how in most cases there is nothing odd in the thought that the dying person may well value a few more years of life. And that is the answer to the challenge of Lucretius: *the loss is the few more years that the person could have had.*

5.3.1 Lucretius has a reply – well, two replies.

Reply One by Lucretius relies on the idea that we need to compare those extra missed years of life with the actual years of being dead – in order to tell whether Oscar is better off being dead or not. Now, while we may notionally be able to give a value to Oscar's extra years alive, what possible value can we give to those years when dead? Oscar then does not exist. It is not that they have negative value or zero value when he is deceased; we are not in the realm of value at all – so it is impossible to compare the two states.

Reply Two by Lucretius is that however young the person is at death, what he has lost – if we are to think in such terms – is an infinite number of years, an endless number; and, in this context, the endless number of years being lost is the same size however young or old he dies. The point here is the paradoxical point that a part of an infinite series may be as large (so to speak) as the whole. The number of even numbers, 2, 4, 6, 8, is as great as the number of numbers, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 – for they can be matched.

Discussion:

8. How do you feel we can respond to the two replies of Lucretius? Or is Lucretius right?
-

5.4 Making the right comparison

Well, we may sidestep the details of the two replies by simply pointing out that the comparison that needs to be made is the following and, when in terms of the following, the comparison makes perfectly good sense. The comparison is between

Oscar's actual life, say to age forty
|<-----Oscar's life to age 40 ----->|

Oscar's possible life, say to age ninety
|<-----Oscar's life to age 90 ----->|

There may be greater happiness, flourishing in the longer life than in the shorter – and that could be assessed, without being ensnared in the complexities of loss of infinite years. The above simple way of comparison may also be used when we do consider, in the next seminar, the value or disvalue of euthanasia and suicide. We need to take into account how significant those extra years are likely to be for the subject.

6. Dying (too) young

As a matter of fact, we do feel that the death of, say, a young person is a greater misfortune than the death of a much older person. So, even if you feel that Lucretius has something right in telling us not to fear death, perhaps we should still fear dying young. Here are some thoughts.

6.1 The Samantha Obsession example

Consider an example.

Samantha is a twenty-year old woman with a lot going for her. She takes a swim off Bondi Beach, wearing just her Obsession perfume. In the water, she meets Suzie – aged six. Suzie is a shark with an obsession for Obsession. That is the end of Samantha – though not of Suzie. The loss of life to Samantha is a great misfortune. Why?

Samantha has undergone a misfortune for two reasons. One reason is that she has lost the (say) sixty more years she could reasonably expect to live. Another reason is the following: all that was required for her to have the long life was for Suzie to have been swimming in a different direction. The possibility of Samantha living to a ripe old age is very close to how things actually could have turned out – but for the accident of Suzie's swim and interest in perfume.

Contrast Samantha's case with an ancient humanist's, Peter Cave. Cave steps into the water, having donned his Obsession perfume – and meets a Suzie (clearly a desperate Suzie, if wanting to dine off such an individual). Given Cave's age and dotage – perhaps he is aged ninety-nine – even if Suzie had resisted temptation to dine on him, there would have to be radical changes in the laws of nature for Cave to be living on for another sixty years.

6.2 Why age matters

Why we typically feel deaths of the young are greater misfortunes than those of the elderly is because we have the background of reasonable expectations, given the existing laws of nature concerning human aging. Yes, with Cave's death and Samantha's death, we could say that the deaths deprived each of them of virtually the same durations, say, a million years of life, were the laws of nature to be so very different. In such circumstances, the difference of seventy-nine (Samantha dying aged 20; Cave's death at age ninety-nine) proportionately is miniscule. To reiterate though, what we treat as misfortunes is against a backdrop of reasonable expectations given the world much as it is – not given a radically different world where human life-spans are typically millions of years.

Although we should accept that death is a loss – and may come too soon – none the less, we learn to accept it as an important part of life and of what may give life meaning. We shall address that matter in the last session, but the next two sessions need to look at how we should treat others – others dying; others who are deceased – before we turn to our own demises.

7. Conclusion

In this session, we have addressed the topic of what it is to continue to be the same person and how death is an end to that continuation. We have seen how arguments that, because death is annihilation, death is not

undesirable miss the fact that the individual, because of death, has still suffered a loss – and that there is a sense of how that loss may occur too soon. Indeed, paradoxically, although Lucretius tells us not to fear death, he does appear to recognize that death may occur too soon and that we may have suffered leakages of happiness. And so, let us end with Lucretius.

Why do you weep and wail over death? If the life you have lived till now has been a pleasant thing – if all its blessings have not leaked away like water poured into a cracked pot and run to waste unrelished – why then, you silly creature, do you not retire from life's banquet as a guest who has his fill of life...?

- Lucretius

Seminar Two: Ending lives

There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide.
- Albert Camus

1. Introduction

Arguably, Albert Camus' comment on suicide shows that we rarely address the truly serious philosophical problem. People, even when reflective about their lives, usually want to go on living; but there can come points when the conditions of living are so painful or distressing that some people prefer death to prolonging the living or 'living death'.

When in dreadful medical conditions, perhaps already nearing the end of life, the situation may be horrendous for the patient as well as for the loved ones, the family members, the medical professionals surrounding that patient. To discuss the matter in an academic way below is, therefore, to distance ourselves from the real-life circumstances – inevitably so. The key line that most humanists would promote, in such real-life circumstances, is that those are just the dire circumstances when the sufferer should usually be allowed to choose whether and when to die.

Furthermore, when in hospital or nursing home, such individuals should not be made to feel that only representative of religions count as being able to help them in their dying days; humanists should also be available, if the dying wish to talk.

This session focuses on death towards what would be the usual end of a natural life; there are, of course, related questions concerning death at the beginning of life, through abortion and infanticide.

2. Bringing forth some of the factors

There are different types of cases where people may contemplate deliberating ending their life, when the matter is on the agenda. It is useful to have some examples in order to highlight some relevant concerns.

2.1 Three cases

- A teenage girl, because of some teenage angst over body image, sexuality or boyfriends, attempts to commit suicide.
- A family man, because of forthcoming exposure over financial ruin, seeks his own death to avoid the life of poverty, gaol, or to ensure that his family collect on the insurance cover.
- A woman, with motor neurone disease, now unable to perform any activities of daily living, finding every breath a struggle, requests help by way of assistance for her to commit suicide or for an act of euthanasia – that is, to be killed in what she perceives to be in her best interests.

Discussion:

9. What are your intuitions over the rights and wrongs of suicide or euthanasia in such cases as the above?
-

The examples have been given so that we may reflect on when we think killings – be they by way of suicide, assisted dying or euthanasia – should be permitted.

What considerations are relevant to such matters? Well, a variety spring to mind – from our love of autonomy, to effects on society, to some basic claims such as that human life is sacred or, in some special way, always to be preserved. You may also have mentioned questions of whether the subjects concerned were really able to make free choices and whether we could know what they really wanted and what was in their best interests.

In what follows, let us assume that we are dealing with cases more akin to our third, of the woman with motor neurone disease. For example, we may have in mind people who are unable to look after themselves, consider it a huge indignity to be living in that way, are also suffering pain and the alleviation of that pain is either failing them or leaving them as zombies. They are going to die; they loathe the indignity of their state. They want their death hastened.

2.2 Distinguishing what is so from how we can tell what is so

It is sensible to be aware of two basic distinctions

The metaphysic/epistemic distinction: we need to separate out what is the case (the metaphysic) from how we can tell what is the case (the epistemic). We may, for example, think that freely chosen euthanasia is morally permissible, yet raise the epistemic question of how we can ever tell whether such choices are free.

The intrinsic/ extrinsic distinction: we need to separate out claims that a certain type of killing is intrinsically wrong – that is, wrong by its very nature – and claims that a certain type of killing is extrinsically or instrumentally wrong – that is, wrong because of some consequences. For example, some may argue that studying philosophy is intrinsically valuable; others may insist that its value resides solely in the consequences of such study, namely the increased likelihood of getting a job. We should note that an action could both be intrinsically wrong and instrumentally wrong – or intrinsically wrong, yet instrumentally right and so on.

2.3 The legal and the moral

In this discussion we are seeking to establish what is morally right and wrong about certain killings. That is a distinct matter from what is legally the case.

Currently, in the United Kingdom, assisted dying and euthanasia are illegal, though there are some guidelines with regard to when prosecutions may be brought. Suicide is legal. What is morally the case and what is legally the case may both differ from what happens in practice and is allowed in practice. The obvious example of the discrepancies is the following: arguably, voluntary euthanasia is morally permissible, yet it is illegal within the United Kingdom. In practice killings quietly take place in hospitals, but are not acknowledged to be such.

Morality and the law can have links. On the one hand, killing innocent individuals is so morally wrong that we may argue that morally there ought to be laws of state against it – and there are. Adultery, on the other hand, one may argue, is not the sort of activity that should be criminalized, even if it is taken to be morally wrong.

At this stage, let us merge suicide, assisted dying and euthanasia. We shall separate off euthanasia in due course. Their differences simply rest on whether and to what extent another party is involved in the subject's death. Also, at this stage, let us assume, without question, that the subject genuinely wants the death and is choosing to do so freely.

3. The Sanctity of Human Life

Many people – religious and non-religious – declare that life is sacred. As they usually happily eat non-human animals, they mean, of course, 'human life'. As some support capital punishment and war, maybe it is best to speak of 'innocent human life', though even that is not sufficiently specific, for some support wars, knowing that innocent life will be taken.

He will live badly
who does not know
how to die well.
- Seneca

3.1 The right to life

The 'sanctity' view is putting forward the claim that killing is intrinsically wrong – and that applies as much to people who are ill and want to die as to the well who want to go on living.

The concern for human life is often expressed in terms of everyone possessing the right to life. We – even more so, the poor, starving and dispossessed – may feel a little sceptical about the significance of that right, bearing in mind that it does not lead to people believing that everyone has a right to whatever is required for life. It does not lead to the claim that we, the lucky ones, have a duty to provide what is required for life for the unlucky.

Discussion:

10. We may pause and reflect – on which duties we truly believe apply to us, bearing in mind the resources we spend on luxuries instead of on provisions for the needy.
-

Bearing in mind the above qualifications to the right to life, it is somewhat surprising that so many people believe that the taking of your own life, be it directly by your own hand, or indirectly by requesting others to do it for you, is morally wrong.

3.2 Religion and killing

Often the opposition to such taking of your own life is religious based, grounded on what are meant to be the dictates of Yahweh or God or Allah.

Discussion:

11. 'Life is a gift to us. We ought not, therefore, to dispose of it.'
-

Of course, if a life really is a gift to us, then we own it and ought to be free to do with it as we wish. True, destroying the gift may show a lack of gratitude, but it may be the right thing to do. In any case, we may wonder whether it is right to view life as a gift and, if we do view it in some way as a gift, perhaps the gift is of life so long as it is going at least reasonably well without pain.

Most humanists find the religious view curious, bearing in mind that many religious texts support killings directly and indirectly in different contexts. Further, Christianity properly understood would seem to be a religion that very much considers this life as nothing but preparation for an afterlife.

3.3 Hume and suicide

What other reasons may apply, when considering the evaluation of someone taking his own life – assuming the action is voluntary and the individual of sound mind? Well, this is where we may be looking for extrinsic factors, though the first mentioned below, courtesy of David Hume, is an intrinsic one: it seems to be our duty to stay alive.

Hume, in his essay 'On Suicide', writes that if suicide is wrong, then it must be because it is a transgression against of our duty either to God, our neighbours or ourselves. Now, humanists, of course, do not believe in God – so that transgression is ruled out. Indeed, Hume makes some good points against believing suicide to be a transgression against God, if there is one. As for the claim that we 'should not play God' over such matters, we play God with regard to saving life, so we may wonder why taking life is resisted.

Hume's other possible transgressions are also dealt with easily by him. If we are suffering and wanting to die, how can we possibly be transgressing a duty to ourselves? Further, if we are indeed ill and suffering, we are likely to be burdens to others; so it is difficult to see that we are failing in our duty to others. However, many people still think that there is something morally wrong with suicide and euthanasia.

They tell us that suicide is the greatest piece of cowardice... that suicide is wrong; when it is quite obvious that there is nothing in the world to which every man has a more unassailable title than to his own life and person.

- Schopenhauer

Humanists typically warm to Hume. They may seek to ground his approach explicitly in a desire to promote human flourishing, such flourishing understood to include autonomy, an individual governing his own life.

4. The Liberty Principle

Humanists in their typical defence of some form of assisted dying or euthanasia often also have in mind the liberty ideal of John Stuart Mill.

4.1 Liberty as self-government

Humanists value autonomy – self-determination – though, there are circumstances when it should be overridden, for example, when the person in question is not of sound mind. Autonomy may be seen as possessing its own intrinsic value or it may be seen as valuable because it leads to something else of value; that is, in the latter case, it may possess instrumental value. It could, of course, possess both.

The famous nineteenth century thinker, John Stuart Mill – humanist in spirit – valued liberty. Mill's stress on liberty, found in his highly influential *On Liberty*, was a stress on individuals being free to make of their lives the best that they can. Others – and governments – could interfere with how people conducted their lives through arguing with them, remonstrating with them, but not by way of stopping them – unless their conduct directly harmed others against their will. Mill's stance was presented in his Liberty Principle (also known as the 'Harm Principle'). The principle may be seen as manifesting the intrinsic value of autonomy or as a manifestation of autonomy being part of the flourishing life, the flourishing life (the happy life) being the aim of Mill's moral philosophy of utilitarianism.

The Liberty Principle

That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant. He cannot rightfully be compelled to do or forbear because it will be better for him to do so, because it will make him happier, because, in the opinions of others, to do so would be wise, or even right. These are good reasons for remonstrating with him, or reasoning with him, or persuading him, or entreating him, but not for compelling him, or visiting him with any evil, in case he do otherwise....

- John Stuart Mill

The principle justifies – unless some greater concern comes into play – permitting individuals not merely to live as they choose, but also to die how they choose, so long as not directly harming others.

Discussion:

12. Under what circumstances should people be allowed to be killed?

4.2 Drawing on Immanuel Kant

You do not have to be a utilitarian to value autonomy. A philosopher very much opposed to the utilitarian stance of justifying actions in terms of their consequences by way of happiness or flourishing was Immanuel Kant. Now, Kant opposed suicide and euthanasia because one of his moral principles was that killing an innocent human being was morally wrong, full stop.

Indeed, as a digression, we may note, though, that Kant explicitly tell us that masturbation is a greater evil than suicide. Why? Well, both are morally wrong, but with masturbation you gain pleasure from the wrongful deed.

Kant's moral philosophy stresses respect for people, for rational agents. Hence, if we keep to that element of his thinking – and ignore his other claims – we may see how permitting euthanasia (and suicide) as morally acceptable is a manifestation of respecting an individual's determination to bring an end to his life. We may present a slogan: 'right to life; right to death'.

5. Euthanasia

We have suggested that voluntary euthanasia is a morally acceptable action. Indeed, we may argue that suicide is morally acceptable; therefore, if an individual is seeking suicide, but is unable to effect it himself, then it is morally permissible for others to help. Not to permit euthanasia is a discrimination against the disabled, unable to end their lives themselves.

Humanistic supporters of voluntary euthanasia are not thereby insisting that any one – doctors, family – must aid someone to die, if that person wants to die. They are not claiming that people who are suffering or are terminally ill must hasten their deaths or be encouraged to do so. All that is being requested is that it not be illegal for someone to aid a person's death, if that person is suffering, is of sound mind and chooses to die, but cannot effect the death himself. Safeguards against abuse can be built within – and should be.

5.1 Different types of euthanasia

Let us note some distinctions. Assisted dying is just that. Namely, a person is assisted in taking her own life. Euthanasia is when someone else takes the person's life. Euthanasia is typically understood as killing a person in her own interests. Euthanasia comes in three varieties: voluntary, non-voluntary, involuntary.

Voluntary euthanasia is self-explanatory. The individual is requesting her death and wanting someone else to kill her..

Involuntary euthanasia is self-explanatory. The individual is opposing her death, yet someone else is killing her in her own interests.

Non-voluntary euthanasia is the area in between. Consider, for example, someone in a persistent vegetative state. He is in no state to have a view either way on whether he prefers to die or carry on living. So, if someone kills him, in his interests, it is a case of non-voluntary euthanasia. There are, of course, other cases where what is or would be desired is unclear.

5.2 Typical comments against euthanasia

We focus here on voluntary euthanasia. Here are the words of a medical consultant:

Euthanasia is NOT palliative care as it does not involve love, care, patience, clinical skill or humaneness. What it espouses is the false belief of self-determination at all costs... It spurs me on to realise that we continue to live in a world of pain, suffering and uncertainty, and to seek to offer my dying patients hope when there seems to be none. Anyone can be an executioner with a bit of training. The economic benefits for euthanasia are obvious to society... maybe this is the hidden agenda of the pro-euthanasia lobby?

- Dr Nicholas Herodotou, locum consultant Palliative Medicine Worcestershire PCT

Discussion:

13. What good considerations, if any, exist in the comments above by Dr N Herodotou?

Ignoring the doctor's emotional language, we may note that the first sentence is misleading. Euthanasia may well involve love, care and such for the patient. It would be recognizing the patient's wishes and autonomy. Does it follow that humanists are committed to 'self-determination' at all costs? Obviously not. As we have seen, Mill's Liberty Principle makes clear that some lines are set on autonomy.

Humanists are committed to the promotion of flourishing lives for people; but a flourishing life is not thereby a life that is prolonged for as long as is physically possible, whatever the state and wishes of the individual concerned. Further, it is not a life for which 'self-determination' holds sway at all costs.

Dr N Herodotou also alludes to the prophecy that voluntary euthanasia may turn into some sort of involuntary euthanasia to save money. Further, he implies that euthanasia undermines palliative care provision. This is where we engage slippery slope arguments. Many people object to voluntary euthanasia and assisted dying because of alleged slopes or thin ends of wedges.

5.3 Slippery Slopes

People often pay lip-service to the idea of voluntary euthanasia being permitted, but then object that none the less it ought not to be permitted for, were it to be so, we should slide down a slope into permitting involuntary euthanasia in varying degrees. The elderly would be encouraged to ask for euthanasia by money-grabbing relatives. Hospitals would encourage the ethos of euthanasia in order to free up beds – and so forth.

5.3.1 Voluntary sex

Consider the following:

Discussion:

14. 'If voluntary sexual intercourse is desirable, we shall soon be sliding into accepting rape as desirable.'

We recognize that voluntary sexual intercourse typically is part of a flourishing life. We are, though, aware that sexual intercourse can take place when people are tired, perhaps somewhat tipsy – and so it is not clear that it is entirely voluntary – and we can recognize the pressures that lead to the intercourse being 'well, okay, old friendship sex', 'well, I guess I'd better' sex, and sometimes moving into date rapes, acquaintance rapes or rapes within a marriage. Also, we know full well that there are horrendous brutal rapes. We do not, though, conclude that, because of the spectrum here and slippery potential, we are justified in prohibiting all voluntary sexual relations. We clearly are not so justified. And just because we permit voluntary wine drinking, we do not think that people will soon be frogmarched to the wine bar.

5.3.2 Preventing slippages

There is no logical or conceptual slide from the 'voluntary' to the 'involuntary'. True, it is sometimes difficult to tell whether something is the case of one or the other – the epistemic problem ('how can we tell?'). True, sometimes an act may have features of both the voluntary and the involuntary or be in a borderline area. None the less, there are numerous occasions when we can clearly see that an action is voluntary and not involuntary – and vice versa. However....

In contrast to such logical points – as a matter of fact given human nature, people may use the permissibility of voluntary euthanasia as an excuse to slide us into accepting 'pressurized' euthanasia. Further, the existence of acts of voluntary euthanasia may just set a more casual ethos to death. What these 'empirical' dangers suggest, though, is that we need clear and tight laws and also improved education, to establish that there is typically a clear difference between the voluntary and the involuntary.

It is worth stressing then that slippery slope arguments against euthanasia are relying on claims about future empirical facts, about what is likely to happen, were euthanasia to be legalized. We should note, then, some empirical facts.

5.4 Palliative care

As a matter of fact, in countries where some version of assisted dying or euthanasia has been introduced, palliative care has not been reduced. Reduction is far from the truth – although those opposed to euthanasia often argue that legalizing euthanasia downgrades palliative care.

- Netherlands: Palliative care provisions have multiplied since legalised euthanasia.
- Belgium: The 2002 euthanasia legalisation was passed with a Palliative Care Bill, doubling the public funding of palliative care.

Indeed, the evidence seems to be that euthanasia does not replace palliative care. Most cases of euthanasia occur at the end of a palliative-care pathway. The highest per capita assistance, drawn from conferences of the European Association of Palliative Care (EAPC), is from Belgium, followed by the Netherlands. In the 2007 EAPC survey, with the exception of the UK and Norway, the countries with the best palliative care tended to have legal assisted death. (For data, see *British Medical Journal* (336: 864-867, 2008) of Professor Jan Bernheim, Wim Distelmans, Arsène Mullie, Johan Bilsen, and Luc Deliens.)

Euthanasia is *not* being recommended as an alternative to palliative care. Permitting voluntary euthanasia is a supplement to palliative care which is failing, be it to do with pain or the indignity involved of some lingering illnesses.

6. More things unsaid

There are many, many more discussions and caveats concerning euthanasia. Here are some considerations for further discussion.

- Many people opposed to euthanasia, none the less hasten the death of someone who is terminally ill – by permitting the use of painkillers that are known to hurry up the dying. This may be justified on the basis of the 'doctrine of double effect'. The end is to reduce the suffering; the death is merely foreseen, not intended. The death is not the intended means for reducing suffering. Of course, if you see the heart of morality as grounded in an action's likely consequences, then such a distinction in that sort of case – between the intended and the foreseen – carries little moral weight.
- Some people seek to distinguish between active euthanasia, where some intervention causes the death, and passive euthanasia, whereby doing nothing causes the death. The latter is sometimes seen as morally permissible, the former as not. Once again, we may question the moral relevance of the distinction. A respirator is not used, so the patient dies. That is perhaps morally acceptable. Yet,

had the respirator been in place before the patient's wishes were known, then would it be morally unacceptable to remove it?

- Some people place the stress on letting people die, but not causing their death. So, the following may be known: if a lethal injection is given, the patient dies painlessly in the next hour. If no lethal injection is given, the patient dies, painfully, over the next two weeks. Which is morally to be preferred?

Discussion:

15. Do you feel that there is a moral distinction between administering a lethal injection, intending that the patient should die, and administering an injection to reduce the patient's pain, yet fully aware that the patient will die as a result?
-

In all the above, we have side-stepped the question of quite when euthanasia or assisted dying should be available. We have not discussed, for example, those difficult cases where the individual seeking death is young and troubled, yet seems to be of sound mind – but is not suffering from a nasty and incurable physical disease. We have not discussed, for example, who should be permitted to do the killing; we have not discussed the morality of the current situation whereby people within the UK are unable to secure euthanasia, but if they have sufficient money, will and knowledge, they can secure the desired outcome by travelling abroad.

7. Conclusion

Helping someone to die – be it in a professional capacity or as a member of the family or as a loved one – is never going to be easy. We should be aware, though, that the time can come when the suffering, the world, is truly all too much for an individual. In such cases, to insist that some incantation from ancient texts speaking of how a human life is sacred and must be kept going, however awful the conditions, should trump the request of the sufferer in the here-and-now is, for many, obscene. To block the desired death is, on some occasions, to shirk a moral duty.

On occasions, to help a person to die is to respect him or her; it is the morally right action.

The suffering or dying person is in a special position, one which requires our attention. To enforce our values on an individual in such a state would need extraordinary justification.

As David Hume writes on suicide, though it surely also applies to assisted dying and voluntary euthanasia,

THAT Suicide may often be consistent with interest and with our duty to ourselves, no one can question, who allows that age, sickness, or misfortune, may render life a burthen, and make it worse even than annihilation. I believe that no man ever threw away life, while it was worth keeping. For such is our natural horror of death, that small motives will never be able to reconcile us to it; and though perhaps the situation of a man's health or fortune did not seem to require this remedy, we may at least be assured that any one who, without apparent reason, has had recourse to it, was curst with such an incurable depravity or gloominess of temper as must poison all enjoyment, and render him equally miserable as if he had been loaded with the most grievous misfortunes.

As our next sessions lead us into questions of death and the meaning of life, we shall shortly leave this session with some words from Nietzsche. Some people do feel the need to shape their lives – their way of life, of what they value – and therefore they also feel the need to shape their death both the manner and timing. If there is some truth in the rejected comment at the very beginning of this course, namely 'death is

the last taboo', it is that current ethos that we should aim to live for as long as possible. We shall see challenges to that in the next two sessions. Here is Nietzsche to lead the way:

In a certain state it is indecent to go on living. To vegetate on in cowardly dependence on physicians and medicaments after the meaning of life, the right to life, has been lost ought to entail the profound contempt of society... To die proudly when it is no longer possible to live proudly. Death of one's own free choice, death at the proper time, with a clear head and with joyfulness, consummated in the midst of children and witnesses: so that an actual leave-taking is possible while he who is living is still there, likewise an actual evaluation of what has been desired and what achieved in life, an adding-up of life - all of this in contrast to the pitiable and horrible comedy which Christianity has made of the hour of death.

*And the days are not full enough
And the nights are not full enough
And life slips by like a field mouse
Not shaking the grass.*

- Ezra Pound

Seminar Three: Respecting the dying; respecting the deceased

Dogs do not have many advantages over people, but one of them is extremely important: euthanasia is not forbidden by law in their case; animals have the right to a merciful death.
Milan Kundera

Many people would sooner die than think. In fact they do.
Bertrand Russell

1. Introduction

Humanists typically believe that death is annihilation, non-existence, not-being. Religious believers in an afterlife may readily acknowledge that humanists may respect the dying, but – they sometimes argue – humanists have no good reason to care about respecting the deceased, the dead. After all, humanists have no image, be it metaphorical or literal, of the earthly deceased now in an afterlife, aware of those individuals left behind on earth, aware of what they are saying and doing about the deceased.

Yet humanists are in reality as respectful of the deceased as are religious believers. Further, humanists do often feel that it is important to have humanist orientated funerals. They do leave flowers at a grave. They do obey deathbed requests. What sense, though, can be made of the respect for the dead?

We first consider how to respect the deceased – and that will lead us back to how to respect for the living, albeit dying, individuals.

2. Respecting the dead

Whether you are religious or irreligious, atheist or agnostic, humanist or anti-humanist, you probably feel that it is wrong to make fun of a corpse, to laugh at people who are bereaved, or casually ignore the deceased's death-bed wishes. Why?

Discussion:

16. Why do you usually feel that it is wrong to mutilate a corpse, laugh in a funeral service or ignore the deceased's death-bed wishes?
-

2.1 For whose sake?

Your answers have probably involved a mish-mash of concerns. How may the concerns be categorized? Here is a simple way.

- The bereaved. You may well recognize that certain actions would distress those left behind, the living, the relatives, the lovers, the friends, the colleagues. So, you do not kick the corpse around or laugh openly at the death because you ought not to upset the living.
- Yourself. You may give voice to the thought that you would not want certain actions and attitudes to be expressed, were you the bereaved or, indeed, the deceased.
- The deceased. You may have a feeling that the deceased should still be respected. Even though he no longer exists, there can still be things done that constitute a respect for him and things done that are the reverse of respect.

2.2 How we respect

Atheists, when atheist colleagues die, still respect their last wishes, still manifest a dignified presence before the corpses – and would consider it wrong, bad manners, to talk ill of the deceased for the sheer fun of it. Yet, they, as said, have no worries about afterlives or about their colleagues gazing down on them.

We respect a person's last wishes; we may tend a grave – we would be appalled at the corpse being interfered with as a toy, being kicked around and so forth. Of course, as seen, we may explain this in terms of how we, the living, feel about such matters; but what accounts for our feelings? The reply may be that we would not want to be mocked, have our corpse kicked around, when we are dead. Well, if that is true, then that reinforces the thought that we do recognize bad things may happen to an individual after death, even when death is annihilation.

The above considerations are meant to challenge the belief that if we are non-religious and have no faith in an afterlife, then death cannot matter to us, once we are dead – and that respect for a person and his reputation is mere superstition, if there is no afterlife.

3. Celebrating a life

Humanists often run funeral services and memorials; they are seen as 'celebrating the life of the deceased'. As with the comments above, the celebration may be for the benefit of the bereaved, may be the sort of event you would like to happen when you are affected – and/or may manifest respect for the deceased individual. Let us consider these elements

3.1 Helping the bereaved

It can clearly be rational to perform such events to help the bereaved – and it may be rational to perform such events on the basis of a desired reciprocity (for when our turn comes) – but can we really be doing something for the benefit of the deceased, given that they are no longer in existence?

3.2 What we do

Well, we may adopt the approach that, human that we are, there are just some things that we do; that we find understandable. We place flowers at the grave; but this is not because we think that the decaying corpse will appreciate the scent. We simply perform such deeds to show our grief, our love, our loss.

Putting those considerations to one side, is there any way in which we may get a grip on the thought that certain things we do, *after* a person's death, may yet harm or benefit that person?

Discussion:

17. After your death – which is annihilation – can anything be good or bad for you?

The question is here to lead us into another element of the arguments from Lucretius, the argument touched upon in the first session.

4. 'What you don't know can't hurt you.'

The simple idea behind the argument about to be discussed is that, once dead, you know of and experience nothing at all. Indeed, you are not even a subject to undergo any experiences. So, how – how – can anything on earth, after your death, harm or benefit you, be good or bad for you?

4.1 Lucretius's argument (again)

Lucretius's argument is, as given in the first session, thus:

Annihilation Assumption: Once death has occurred, the deceased individual no longer exists as a subject of experiences.

Existence Assumption: An event can be good or bad for individuals only if they exist at the time of the event, as subjects of possible experiences.

Hence, once deceased, nothing can be good or bad for the individuals so deceased.

4.2 The need for existence?

In order to decide on the merits of the argument, let us limber up by asking whether anything can be good or bad for you, if you do not exist.

Discussion:

18. For something to be good or bad for you, to benefit or harm you, must you not exist?

Perhaps the simpler cases are the prenatal, pre-birth ones, rather than the posthumous, post-death ones. Clearly a would-be mother, with a drug-crazed and HIV-infected life-style, could damage her child-to-be. That is a case where something may happen that harms you, even though you do not exist. 'Ah,' comes the reply, 'the accurate comment should be that you do not *yet* exist.'

For the lifestyle to be harmful, the child does need to become, to come into existence – and then undergo a resultant harm because of the mother's life-style. Some physical or mental damage must surely occur for there to be a harm – or so it is thought. That seems so different from the case of death.

4.3 Are experiences required for you to be harmed?

The pre-birth cases still rely on the existence of the individual at some stage to be harmed and who undergoes the harm. So, here is another question.

Discussion:

19. For you to be harmed or undergo a misfortune, do you need to experience it?

You may have wondered about a host of cases: colleagues talking behind your back to block your promotion; hospital staff secretly laughing at your medical condition; being betrayed. So, we may answer 'no' to the above question because we may realize that what matters to us personally and our interests extend beyond the boundaries of our skin and what we know or think.

Let us consider a vivid example:

Suppose you value the love and fidelity of your wife and your children, yet secretly they despise you. You are a committed family man, yet your wife has numerous secret affairs, talks you down behind your back – and the children also dislike you. Yet they do not show their true feelings to you – maybe because they value the financial support you offer. They put on an excellent front; so you never know of how they really feel about you. In such a world, you have no knowledge of their genuine feelings, yet are you not being harmed, being damaged, by what is happening?

Discussion:

20. Does the above example of betrayal show that some harm or misfortune has occurred for you – even though you know nothing about it?
-

4.4 Responses to the betrayal example

One reply often given is that you are being harmed because you are likely to find out; you are bound to sense that they are not being honest in their dealings. Our example is, though, what philosophers call a 'thought experiment'. We suppose what is surely possible – namely, that really you do never find out. May it be that you are still being harmed, even though from your perspective all seems well?

Another reply often given is simply that you cannot be harmed, if you really are never going to find out. After all, 'from within' the world seems just as if your wife and children were devoted to you – and you lack access to the truth, to how things really are. 'Ignorance is bliss' as they say. And it is true that, in the thought experiment described, the world to you seems exactly as it would seem, were you not being betrayed, laughed at – and so forth.

5. 'What you don't know *can* hurt you.'

Some philosophers – and the distinguished American philosopher Thomas Nagel is one – insist that you can be harmed, can undergo a misfortune, even though you never find out.

5.1 An argument to establish non-experiential harms

Suppose you are in the world in which you never will find out about the disloyalty and the lack of love. We may still consider the hypothetical possibility – counter to fact – of 'were you to find out'. Were you to find out – what then? You would feel distressed. You may say that you wished you had not known. But the distress, the wish not to have known, suggests that what you have found out about was a harm, a misfortune. Why else would it matter that you have found out? The conclusion is that, just because you do not experience a harm, you may still be harmed by it. That is, there are non-experiential harms. So, if nothing can harm you when you are dead, it cannot simply be because you cannot experience the harm.

5.1.2 In our above example of betrayal, though, you do exist. Perhaps what makes the case of the dead person different is because he no longer exists. The reason why harms cannot affect you when you are dead is not because you cannot experience them, but because you do not exist at all and will not be in existence for any harms or misfortunes – or benefits and goods – to happen. If you do not exist after death, then how can you be harmed by any events after your death?

The reply is that, again, what is being forgotten is the fact that your interests extend beyond your physical and mental awareness – and existence.

5.2 How your interests extend beyond your existence

Suppose that Oscar has spent his life producing a major work on hedgehogs, their habits, life-spans etc. Being of modest disposition, once his manuscript is finished, he sends it off to his Cambridge publisher and sends himself off to a desert island – to avoid the anticipated fame. Bearing in mind the non-experiential harms described above, if the manuscript is burnt and all his labours are wasted, that is a harm to him – even if he learns nothing about the loss. Now, suppose that just before the fire in Cambridge that destroys his life's work, Oscar dies on his faraway shore. Why should that suddenly ensure that the destruction of his labours is no longer harmful for him?

Discussion:

21. Are you convinced by such examples of how you may be harmed when no longer existing?

5.2.1 That an event happens after a person's death, if we agree with the sentiment of such examples, does not mean that it cannot harm – or, indeed, benefit – the deceased person. There is no need to believe that misfortunes and good fortunes are only possible if the person is somehow still existing, looking down from a heaven – or up from a hell.

The assumption that is being challenged by these examples is the assumption that an event can only harm someone if that person physically or mentally exists at the time of the event. We have seen how that assumption is mistaken with regard to events before our conception; it is also mistaken with regard to events after our death.

6. Everyday dealings with the dead

Our everyday practices, as said, of people who certainly have no belief in afterlives manifest concern for how we treat people who are dead. We are concerned because we know, for example, that people – even deceased people – undergo misfortunes if their reputations are harmed. We know we have mistreated them, even though they are deceased, if we ignore their deathbed requests.

6.1 Kafka's works and wishes

Here is a real-life example. Kafka left instructions to his friend, Max Brod, to destroy his unpublished works and letters. After Kafka's death, Brod did not follow his request.

Discussion:

22. Should Brod have destroyed Kafka's works, following the instructions of the author?

This is a difficult question for we are needing to weigh up some incommensurable factors. Let us suppose that Brod made no promise to Kafka, but just knew what Kafka wanted. So, he failed to carry out Kafka's wishes. The writings were Kafka's personal property, so should Brod have ignored Kafka's wishes? Presumably not – but for him to have published the writings does not show that he ignored Kafka's wishes or did not respect them. Other factors needed to be taken into account – factors such as the loss of the literary works of merit, and the state of mind of the author. In cases where deathbed requests have been made, we need to raise the question of the competence of judgements by people about certain matters when nearing death. That latter point has, of course, relevance to how we treat requests for euthanasia from people seriously ill.

6. Euthanasia requests and non-requests

We saw how the humanist default position with regard to euthanasia is that it is morally permissible – but that, of course, was restricted to voluntary euthanasia. Now, the caveat of 'voluntary' is, in some cases, no simple caveat. This need not be because it is unclear what the individual is wanting now – that may be perfectly clear – but is what he is wanting what *he* is wanting.

6.1 Established wants

A person exists over time – persists – and sometimes what is wanted 'at a moment' or chosen 'at a moment' is not what that individual, as a persisting individual wants or chooses, if somewhat detached from the moment. Classic cases of this occur with the instances of weak-will. You want the extra cream bun – and, indeed, you choose it – yet, in a more detached mode, you would recognize that you do not really want it, do not really choose it.

6.1.1 Homer tells of Odysseus wanting to hear the singing of the Sirens, their melodious and, no doubt, sensual song. Odysseus knew that the song beguiled. Sailors were unable to resist its sweetness; their lack of resistance led them to watery graves. Odysseus's solution – what he reasoned to – was to have his sailors bind him to the ship's mast with instructions not to release him, however much he struggled, however much he showed himself to have changed his mind. Further, their ears were stopped with beeswax so that they would not themselves be tempted by the song – and by his later seeming change of mind, his desire to join the Sirens on hearing them.

Discussion:

23. Which factors come into play, when considering a person's request for euthanasia?

6.2 Remaining the same person (again)

As seen in the first session, it is difficult to understand quite what constitutes a person remaining the same person over time, but without a doubt we can understand the rationality of Odysseus's actions. He puts his plan into action in order to get what he now wants for himself in the future, namely, hearing the Sirens but without yielding. Yet paradoxically that means he is making a pre-commitment, binding himself to a future commitment, namely of not getting what he genuinely will be wanting later on.

For it comes about at times that a man suffers such changes that it is difficult to say he is the same, as I have heard related of a certain Spanish poet, who had been seized with a certain sickness, and although he recovered from it, remained so oblivious of his past life that he did not think the tales and tragedies he had written were his own, and could easily have been mistaken for a grown-up infant had he forgotten how to speak. And if this seems incredible, what shall we say of infants, whose nature a man of advanced age deems so different from his own that he could not be persuaded that he ever was one if he did not make a conjecture about his own case from the examples of others?

- Spinoza

The above is not meant to suggest that therefore a one-off request for euthanasia should be rejected; rather they are to remind us that requests near the end of a life need to be seen in light of the life as a whole – and also what it is reasonable to believe. People may simply not know how painful dying sometimes can be; so, although they may have shown no interest in being keen on euthanasia or assisted dying during their active years, a sudden interest when dying is very understandable. Some women, for example, are committed to 'natural childbirth', yet in some cases when the labour is indeed excruciating painful, they may announce a genuine change of heart and one that is readily understandable.

6.3 Non-requests

When someone clearly is requesting help to die and is clearly in severe pain or distress, yet of sound mind – well, that is the easy type of case and humanists will usually feel that the priority should be given to the individual's wishes. There are, though, many difficult cases.

6.3.1 First, arguably here are some clear 'non-voluntary' cases.

A man is in a persistent vegetative state. There is no brain function, but his heart and other organs are functioning, with the aid of artificial apparatus.

A man is in a persistent vegetative state. There is no brain function, but his heart and other organs are functioning – without the aid of any artificial apparatus.

Discussion:

24. In the cases above, which factors are relevant to whether he should be allowed to die?

Obviously, there are questions concerning the wishes and distress of the relatives; but one prime factor here is whether he expressed earlier wishes about what he would like done – an advance directive – if in such circumstances. Arguably, we are not here even talking of non-voluntary euthanasia, or about euthanasia at all, for the person – the individual we knew so well – is no more. Only his shell remains. To value and protect human life need not be to value and protect the empty shell continuing to function.

6.3.2 Here is the more difficult type of case:

Your partner is suffering from Alzheimer's. She has radically deteriorated. She wanders around in a nursing home, but seems to have no memory, recognizes no one and is aggressive. Some years earlier, she expressed the wish – consistently so, over the years – that were she ever to end up in that state, she would want you to end her life.

Discussion:

25. What (morally) ought you to do?

7. Conclusion

Humanists obviously seek to respect the dying – and an element of that respect is to respect their wish for an earlier painless death rather than a prolonged painful death. Humanists, though, will also want to show respect for the deceased – and that is not incompatible with having no belief in an afterlife.

We may note that some people will actively desire their death to be of value to others, for example, through leaving their organs for others. True to his utilitarianism, that was the atheist and humanist Jeremy Bentham's desire. He left detailed instructions about use of his body to further the 'greatest happiness of the greatest number'. Jeremy Bentham and his instructions can still be seen in the South Cloisters at University College London.

When Wittgenstein was told of his advanced cancer and likely death within a few months, he commented that he did not start looking forward to or hoping for any form of afterlife. Instead, the news immediately caused him to focus on what he was doing – and indeed he wrote the work that was published as *On Certainty* – the last entry of which was written the day before he died. On that day, it was his birthday and he was wished 'many happy returns'.
'No more returns,' he replied.

Seminar Four: Death and the meaning of life

The death of Socrates (399bc)

'But how shall we bury you?' [asked Crito]

'Any way you like,' replied Socrates, 'that is, if you can catch me and I don't slip through your fingers.' He laughed gently as he spoke, and turning to us went on: 'I can't persuade Crito that I am this Socrates here who is talking to you now and marshalling all the arguments; he thinks that I am the one whom he will see presently lying dead; and he asks how to bury me!...

'Someone had better bring in the poison...'

'But surely, Socrates,' said Crito, 'the sun is still upon the mountains; it has not gone down yet. Besides, I know that in other cases people have dinner and enjoy their wine...and only drink the poison quite late at night. No need to hurry; there is still plenty of time.'

'It is natural that these people whom you speak of should act in that way, Crito,' said Socrates, 'because they think that they gain by it. And it is also natural that I should not; because I believe that I should gain nothing by drinking the poison a little later – I should only make myself ridiculous in my own eyes if I clung to life and hugged it when it has no more to offer...'

The coldness was spreading about as far as his waist when Socrates uncovered his face – for he had covered it up – and said (they were his last words): 'Crito, we ought to offer a cock to Asclepius. See to it, and don't forget.'

'No, it shall be done,' said Crito. 'Are you sure that there is nothing else?'

Socrates made no reply to this question, but after a little while he stirred; and when the man uncovered him, his eyes were fixed. When Crito saw this, he closed the mouth and eyes.

Such, Echecrates, was the end of our comrade, who was, we may fairly say, of all those whom we knew in our time, the bravest and also the wisest and most upright man.

- Plato, *Phaedo*

1. Introduction

When death is the end – is complete annihilation – it casts a shadow on life, well it casts such a shadow for many of us. Religious believers may convince themselves that they can avoid that shadow for, of course, they do not believe that death is the end or need be the end. More accurately, with regard to some believers, they honestly say that they feel that they could not live their lives, if thinking that their lives ended in death and were hence meaningless. Humanists live lives without such hopes or wants.

In this session we shall look at how life may, or may not, have point or meaning, given death – and what it is that does give meaning to life, when no appeal to God, gods or eternal afterlife living is made.

2. What's the point?

Many of us find ourselves asking that question – often with tones of despair or resignation.

2.1 The disvalue of eternal life

Religious believers turn to God and an afterlife to give lives meaning. That requires a few observations.

First, just because we may hope or want something – or don't think we can have a meaningful life without something – it does not follow that the thing in question exists. Hopes and wants typically are not self-fulfilling, though occasionally they may be. The hope or want for eternal life has nothing to do with whether such a life exists or is even possible; but, of course, if you can live by such a hope or want, then it may make things go better for you or seem so to do. Many people, though, would prefer to live in contact with reality and not live a life of illusion, of mistaken belief in an afterlife.

A second observation is that an eternal life does not have to be perceived as being for the good, even on Christian or Muslim terms. We may not receive the grace of God; we may be judged – and end with eternal damnation. That does not sound a very good way of giving meaning to our earthly life.

The third observation concerns the eternal life which is not one of damnation, but is of so-called 'heavenly bliss' or 'oneness with God'. Would such a life really generate meaning? If there is a puzzle about the meaning of a finite life here on Earth, then as Wittgenstein and others have pointed out, there must also be a puzzle about the meaning of an eternal life. If the 'meaning' of life is a puzzle, then it is as much of a puzzle (if not more) for an eternal life as for a finite life.

[Eternal survival after death] completely fails to accomplish the purpose for which it has always been intended. Or is some riddle solved by my surviving forever? Is not this eternal life as much of a riddle as our present life?
- Wittgenstein

2.2 Sisyphus rolling the boulder eternally

Sisyphus is condemned to roll a huge and heavy boulder to the top of a hill. The boulder always rolls back down, the result being that Sisyphus must start his labours again – and again. His task is endless and, it seems, pointless for he never achieves the boulder's hilltop permanency. In nightmare hours of darkness – and even with eyes open in the day's cold light – we may suffer feelings of Sisyphian futility, of 'What's the point?'

Discussion:

26. So, what is the point of life?

Here are some possible quick answers. The answers show that we read the question in terms of 'why do we do the things that we do?' What are the purposes, the aims, the points?

- Achievements – but whatever we achieve, we may, soon after, experience boredom, so we start the struggle again. Even when we push boulders to the top with no roll-back, we then struggle with yet more tasks in life.
- Others – perhaps we find points to our lives in our projects, our children, our grandchildren – yet surely they only make our lives 'point-filled' if their lives are with point. Have we not passed the 'point-filling' buck to others?

2.3 The point of what?

We need to distinguish between the points that are to be found within an individual's life – and the point of the life for others. Obviously, within your life, you engage in various activities with point, with purpose. You may, though, step outside those internal concerns and ask about the point, the purpose, of your whole life, externally so; and you may answer that question with reference to bigger projects, children, grandchildren continuing.

The 'point' question can be pushed further. What is the point, the purpose, of all of those points? Thus it is that the 'What's the point?' question may have us seeking for more and more, endlessly. People, it appears, insist that life requires point through things external to that life; and then, they insist, those things too require point. And so, as a last throw of the die, they turn to God as providing point.

'The point of A is B,' we may say. 'Ah,' they shake their heads, 'but what is the point of B?' 'C,' we reply. 'Not good enough,' they say, 'for what is the point of C?'

2.4 Points without point

If, for something to be meaningful, it must have point, and if points must always be external, also possessing point, then we shall be forever inconsolable. But that is only because we have set ourselves a logically impossible demand. As it is logically impossible, we should come to see that there is nothing actual or possible to be concerned about. If something is logically impossible, there is no sense in the idea of it. And yet ... And yet we may still feel disquiet, even though intellectually knowing of that logical point.

'If my life is eternal, then all is well.' That is the theistic hope returning, the hope that we saw earlier. But, if we may sensibly ask the point of this or that, we may also ask, 'What is the point of eternal life?' If 'to the glory of God' is the response, then the question again arises. What is the point of glorifying God and of God's glory?

Sometimes the thought is that our lives have point because we are part of a grand plan. We should not, though, fall for thinking that, if we are part of a plan, thereby all is fine. Whether things are fine or not depends on the plan. Do grouse have meaningful lives because they are part of a greater plan, a plan that reaches its climax on the glorious twelfth, when they are shot? Whatever is said along the lines of eternity and God and a divine plan, if our present life is a riddle, then so is the eternal, so is God and so is any divine plan.

3. Pessimism

Schopenhauer, known as the 'philosopher of pessimism', stressed the suffering of human life.

3.1 Schopenhauer's considerations

Either we want something that we lack or we have got what we wanted. Either way, we suffer – either through the lack of what we want or through boredom from the lack of want, now having what we wanted. True, a multitude of different wants may criss-cross; we may be satisfied (or not) at different times, but a mishmash of sufferings and boredom does not detract from the suffering and boredom.

Is Schopenhauer right? With many things, we simply enjoy the activity of overcoming the dissatisfactions. Perhaps even Sisyphus could be happy in his eternal boulder rolling.

Discussion:

27. Must we always be doing something with a point, a purpose in mind?

3.2 Ends and means

One mistake that gives rise to the disquiet about meaning is that we can too readily and sharply divide our activities into means and ends, between the doings and points of those doings. We then run the danger of valuing only the points, the ends. Indeed, we run the danger of closing our eyes to how the badness of the means deployed may outweigh the advantages of the ends sought. Reflect, for example, on the constant improvements going on to roads and offices and homes in typical towns – to improve the quality of life. Yet the continuing screeches and drillings and other disruptions, through the improvements' workings, diminish the desired quality. Always to be striving can undervalue the here-and-now.

It is a mistake to think that if we deploy means to an end, the means are irrelevant, lacking all value in themselves, and it is the end alone that matters. Our goal may be to reach the top of Mount Everest but we do not want to reach it by just any means. We want to climb the mountain, do battle with blizzards, struggle on, up and up. Achievements are measured not solely by the outcomes but by how those outcomes have been achieved. To find ourselves transported to Everest's summit by helicopter or at the press of a button would lose the appeal of achievement, unless the sought achievement was that of managing successfully to fly the helicopter or to build a machine that could whisk people from A to B at a button's press.

3.3 Sufferings in the world

Schopenhauer, though, may be right in his pessimism, in as far as most lives involve more sufferings than satisfactions. Many sufferings seem more or less inevitable – even for those who are life's winners. There are losses of family, friends and lovers; awareness of the increasing disabilities likely in old age; and, in all likelihood, direct experience of those disabilities ourselves one day and for some years – and then the pains of dying. There is awareness of the sufferings of millions of other people, past, present and future; and we should add in the sufferings of animals.

With such reflections as the above, we may sometimes agree that the happiest are, as Sophocles wrote, those never to have been born.

4. Size

One thought that generates a sense of futility and pointlessness is to do with size.

4.1 We are but specks

We focus on how teeny our concerns are in relation to the universe as a whole. We worry that our lives ultimately do not matter; we note that we are such tiny specks in a universe so vast.

If the problem – a problem of size mattering – is that we are so spatially small, well, conceive us big; expand us spatially to fill the universe. If the problem is our temporal teeniness, then expand us that way too. Let us become the whole of the universe, in space, in time. Does that therefore help to make us ultimately matter? The answer is 'no'. Whatever features we may propose to make us ultimately matter, we may always ask why possession of those features matters.

4.2 Bringing ourselves back to earth

Humanism brings us back down to earth. As the humanist Frank Plumpton Ramsey stressed (his younger brother became Archbishop of Canterbury), size is (usually) irrelevant with regard to what is important.

Meanings are simply given within our lives, and to our lives through others. That is part of what matters. What matters is also getting at the truth – getting at the truth, for example, of what matters. Some states and attitudes and actions have intrinsic value – full stop.

I don't feel the least humble before the vastness of the heavens. The stars may be large, but they cannot think or love; and these are qualities which impress me far more than size does. I take no credit for weighing nearly seventeen stone.

My picture of the world is drawn in perspective, and not to scale. The foreground is occupied by human beings and the stars are all as small as threepenny bits ... I apply my perspective not merely to space but also to time. In time the world will cool and everything will die; but that is a long time off still, and its present value at compound discount is almost nothing. Nor is the present less valuable because the future will be blank.

Humanity, which fills the foreground of my picture, I find interesting and on the whole admirable.

- Frank Plumpton Ramsey

Ramsey was a fellow of King's College Cambridge, in the 1920's. He found meaning in life through his work – his philosophy, mathematics and economics – and through mountaineering, music, and, indeed, romance and sexuality. And people do find their lives filled with meaning – and yet.

And yet... we may still feel some ultimate disquiet at life, at the point of life, despite some awareness of the vacuity of the puzzle.

4.3 Living with disquiet

'If my life ends with death, then my doings have been without point.' The sorrowful sigh is often heard; and in bleakness, in shadows of night's stillness, it moves many of us. Of course, the sigh expresses no truth. My doings, as said, may have point and value within my life and also in affecting others. Many people find point through children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, pets and projects – being part of a bigger enterprise: the arts club, the college, the humanitarian cause, even, sadly, the gang that terrorizes neighbours. Points have to come to an end – yet they are no worse for that.

5. Our lack of life before birth

However much we may argue that the demand for the impossible – a point to it all – is itself a pointless demand, the disquiet may persist. We may continue to feel that living longer would help. It just is true of the human condition that we often would like to go on living for longer.

5.1 Always, an extra day wanted

Take any day of our likely death: if we are not suffering or even if we are, but we have uncompleted projects – be they to water the garden, visit Jerusalem, meet with old friends, make love with new friends, or simply finish the book or try the latest wine – then we should like to live a little longer. It is worth noting that just because, on any given occasion, we may desire the extra week, month, year of life, it does not follow that we in fact would desire to live forever, to be immortal.

5.2 Being born earlier

To ease us out of our concern for more and more life, Lucretius asks us what attitude we have to our earlier non-existence, to all those centuries we failed to exist before we were born.

Discussion:

28. Do you regret not having been born earlier?

Of course, there may be particular events in the past that you would like to have witnessed; there may be life-styles in the past that you would have enjoyed living – but those are no examples of a desire to live longer. True, as an ancient popular song goes, you may feel you were 'born too late' because you are too young for the older man whom you adore. Again, that is not an example of wanting to live longer. At heart, typically we do not regret our lack of earlier existence.

Lucretius is aware of our 'at heart' about such matters. We do not truly worry about our lack of earlier existence; we should not, he suggests, worry about our lack of existence in the future.

Look back at the eternity that passed before we were born, and mark how utterly it counts to us as nothing. This is a mirror that Nature holds up to us, in which we may see the time that shall be after we are dead. Is there anything terrifying in the sight – anything depressing – anything that is not more restful than the soundest sleep?

- Lucretius

5.3 The asymmetry between earlier life and later

Lucretius' argument ignores an asymmetry, an asymmetry between your life continuing further into the future – and your having been conceived earlier.

Discussion:

29. What do you make of Lucretius's consideration? Is our past non-existence a good analogy for our future non-existence?

We should see that the analogy does not work at all well. You can easily imagine living for longer than in fact you will, having some decades, even many more decades of life – and it still being you. There would be the psychological continuity mentioned earlier, your sense of your 'self' continuing, as well as probably bodily and neural continuity. But what sense can you really make of its still being you, had you been born, say, fifty years earlier?

To make the problem vivid, what sense can you make of having been born five centuries earlier and yet it still being you? The upbringing, the surroundings of that individual – no electricity, no aspirins, no radio, none of the music that nurtured you, no cars, no anaesthetics – would be so radically different that that we should lose all sense of that individual being you. We could not make sense of all those different experiences forming the experiential years of *your* early life, somehow cohering with the experiences and memories of the 'you' now.

For death – or too late a birth – to deprive you of anything, there needs to be 'you', the self, in existence. With a much earlier existence, it is very difficult to get a grip on its being 'you'.

6. The quest for immortality; the need for death

Shelley's sonnet 'Ozymandias' tells of a traveller from an antique land uncovering some broken pillars and a shattered visage.

So much for the attempt by the king of kings to immortalize his fame; yet even had he succeeded, we may still have asked how that immortal fame produced meaningfulness or point to his life. After all, our lives, and not mere fame, even if eternal, fail, as said, to overcome the threat of meaninglessness.

*And on the pedestal these words appear:
'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.*
- Shelley

6.1 Drinking an elixir of life

The Makropulos Case is a tale of an individual drinking of the elixir of life. Emilia Marty – EM – can live eternally aged 42. The tale is from Karel Čapek's play, now a Janáček opera, Yet, 'in the end', EM has had enough.

Discussion:

30. Would you drink of the elixir of life? Why?

When we consider such tales, we need to fill in some details to gain a grip on what sense can be made of the possibility.

One question is whether the elixir protects us from death by accidents and illness – and whether it saves us from significant harms. If it does, then an immortal life would be very different from the mortal. We should lack many worries about dangerous roads, nuclear war, and dying from starvation. Deployment of concepts such as 'courage' and 'safety', and our concern for others, would be very different. For that matter, our blood, bones and organs would need to respond very differently to radiation, high-level impacts and excess

alcohol. Our life would scarcely be recognizable as human. So, is the possibility really even a possibility for a human being?

Another question concerns the numbers involved. If you are the sole immortal, then you will see friends come and go in life; you will go through the gamut of relationships with different people – and maybe eventually with no people at all, just your fading memories of them. If, though, you and a few others are immortal – maybe those wealthy enough to afford the elixirs – would you not be akin to a species different from regular humans? And if numerous people are made immortal, then the eventual 'lack of space' for newly created people suggests relationships between man and woman would eventually be altered: desires for children would need radical revision.

6.2 Features of eternal living: boredom?

If you retain sufficient memory to make sense of yourself as continuing, then, after millions of years, would you not be bored by having yet again to start up relationships with new people, if in the world where you are the sole immortal? And if you are in the world where everyone is immortal, would you not be bored by meeting the same people eternally?

In response, maybe there are some worthwhile pleasures that could be repeated infinitely, or maybe people would possess the capacity to devise endlessly new projects. If, for example, you are fascinated by numbers, your infinite time could be filled with further reflections on yet higher numbers and their properties: there is no end to numbers. Or maybe, as in a drugged haze, you could value the same heightened sensations returning eternally, or listen to the same music – the same Bartok string quartets – literally endlessly. Or could you?

Even if the boredom and horror could be avoided, there remains a problem for motivation. If something can be put off until tomorrow, why not put it off? There would be an infinite number of 'tomorrow's – so there would be little urgency to engage in anything today. Indeed, with no end in view, unless you repeatedly deceive yourself into thinking otherwise, you may rightly wonder what structure could be given to your life.

Necessarily, dying tends to be either too early or too late. EM reminds us that it can be too late, and many need no reminding that it can be too early.

- Bernard Williams

6.3 The danger of eternal life

Paradoxically, although many people view life as meaningless if ending in the finality of death, it is eternal life that endangers meaning.

For life to have meaning, arguably it needs an end: it needs death to provide a framework within which to pattern our lives. That does not imply that current life-spans are ideal. Perhaps lives of a thousand years would or could be good. We may question, though, how a life can be judged as desirable or not, if we lack conception of its end; and we may wonder what sense there is in its being 'me' living immortally, given the radical difference between a life mortal and one immortal.

7. How to live – with absurdity

One understanding of 'absurdity' is that of 'incongruity', of clashes of perspective.

Discussion:

31. What is there about life that may strike you as absurd?

7.1 Human life's absurdity

We encountered earlier the vast contrast between the size of our lives and the size of the universe. Well, human that we are, we can adopt more or less detached perspectives. Here is an example.

Think again of how important some things in your life strike you. When a teenager, you may have been overwhelmed with concern for the acne showing or how your first date would go. At work, you may be only too conscious of a slighting remark from a colleague – or at home, the way that a neighbour ignored you. Think of the importance you may give to having matching china or the right quality of wine or securing the extra quarter of a percent interest on a bank account. We all are so attached to the world, enmeshed in the world in such ways. Yet we can also stand back, detach ourselves – and see how utterly unimportant such concerns are 'from the viewpoint of the universe'.

The American philosopher Thomas Nagel highlights such absurdities of our lives, as in the above. We possess such absurdities for we are able to engage in that distant detachment. A mouse lacks absurdity; it is unable to step outside of its desires for cheese and chocolate and feline-avoidance.

7.2 Disparities on Earth

Many of us may live within melancholy resulting from further incongruities, ones more at home. We realize that invariably life contains disappointments; we realize too that there is considerable suffering and yet, however much we care, that does not prevent us from visiting the opera, delighting in love, or simply forgetting those dispossessed others as we survey life's scenes over coffee with friends or at a football match. Are we living our lives as we should?

7.3 A detached perspective on our life

Tolstoy wrote of Ivan Ilyich:

'What if in reality my whole life has been wrong?' It occurred to him that what had appeared utterly impossible the night before – that he had not lived his life as he should have done - might after all be true.

Standing back, we may raise the question raised by the Tolstoy character. True, the words of Ivan Ilyich may take detachment one giant leap too far; yet that we can reflect on our lives – and seek for better – is distinctively human. And while we are alive, there is always the possibility of seeing our lives in a new light or acting afresh such that our lives take on a different colour.

The comment by Kierkegaard may remind us of the above point. With vision cast forward, we have to make choices and those choices may cast our lives to date in different lights. How we read the past depends in part on the future. What may currently be seen as bad moves, in retrospect may have success writ large on their face. What appeared lousy formation on the football pitch may become inspired and farsighted, if of the winning team. Praised government policies may, in retrospect, be much condemned because of surprising outcomes.

*Life must be lived forwards, though
can only be understood backwards.*
- Søren Kierkegaard

7.4 A test for our lives

Nietzsche spoke of the death of God. In the absence of divinity, Nietzsche pointed to the need for us to evaluate our lives: to take responsibility for what we do, for how we live, for how we die – for what sort of individuals we are. One way of assessing whether we are proud of our lives is that of pretending we should have to live them again and again, eternally, with no change. Of course, the very idea is nonsensical (if they really are exactly the same, would they not collapse into one life – this one?). Despite the nonsense, it can be a way of facing up to the existential problem of how to live.

Here is Nietzsche's most dreadful and terrifying of thoughts, 'the greatest weight':

What if, some day or night, a demon were to steal into your loneliest loneliness and say unto you:

'This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once again and innumerable times again; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unspeakably small or great in your life must return to you, all in the same succession and sequence – even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned over again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!'

Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? ... Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life – *to long for nothing more fervently* than this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal?

7.5 Bringing to fore what is bad about death.

Prior to death, we retain scope. We make take our lives in new directions, make amends for the past, offer our renderings of what we did. The sting in death is that once dead we are, in Sartre's bleak terminology, 'prey to the living', to the Other. We are impotent. Others may sum up our lives, fix and classify us.

Even here, as we reflect on such, we are trying to step outside ourselves, to see ourselves as others do. And yet, even if we know that the whole universe is to be destroyed with us – so, no others are left behind to judge us, to party on without us – we may still find the finality of our death difficult to comprehend and accept as it draws near... if we were to know that this is the last hour or minute of life... And yet does even that matter? Thus, just as we reflect that immortality offers no solution to the 'meaning of life' puzzles, we may reflect too that death also is no solution: we may collapse and return to the red wine.

The very existence of death alienates us wholly in our own life to the advantage of the Other. To be dead is to be prey for the living. This means therefore that the one who tries to grasp the meaning of his future death must discover himself as the future prey to others...
- Jean-Paul Sartre

When David Hume was oppressed by reason failing to resolve his philosophical puzzles, he too turned elsewhere which may well have included some liquid of the vine or grain. Hume writes:

Most fortunately it happens, that since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium, either by relaxing this bent of mind, or by some avocation and lively impression of my senses, which obliterate all these chimeras. I dine, I play a game of back-gammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends...

7.6 Reflection needs to know its place.

In this course, we have been engaged in reflection. It is, though, fitting to emphasize, as we draw to a close, that *not* reflecting also brings value, brings meaning. There can be paradoxical delight in losing the self, in simply surrendering to dawn, to dusk, to desires – to mosaics of colours and sounds, from scuffling leaves and storms of snow to a skylark ascending over a heath or to the string quartets of Beethoven.

Life paradoxically can mean all the more when lost within experiences – be they of nature, of love, of games; of art, of scents, of opera. There is charm in saying nothing, in saying nothing at all. There is charm in – experiencing.

*When the mountain flowers are blooming,
Their scent carries their meaning.*

And paradoxically, still saying more, when the mantra 'there must be more to life' beats at us, maybe we need to reflect a little further – and the author of this text, Peter Cave, a humanist wrote thus (from chapter 33 of his *Can a Robot Be Human? 33 Perplexing Philosophy Puzzles*):

All the things we value, however rare, however small, that give point or meaning to our lives – the friendships, loves and absurdities; those soundscaped memories entwined with shared passions and glances that magically ensnare and enfold; the intoxications of wines and words, and wayward musings and music, with which we wrestle into misty slumbering nights, our senses revived by sparkling waters, much needed at dawn; the seascapes of wild waves, mysterious moonlights and images and widening skies that stretch the eyes – do indeed all cease to exist; and curiously the most enchanting are oft those within which we lose ourselves and also cease to be – yet that they, and we, existed at some time remains timelessly true, outside of all time.

For lovers of eternity, that is as good as it gets.

*There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words.
They make themselves manifest. They are what is mystical.*
- Wittgenstein

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Readings

General readings

Cave, Peter and Lator, Brendan (eds) *Thinking about Death* (London: BHA, 2004)
Critchley, Simon *The Book of Dead Philosophers* (London: Granta, 2008)
Hanfling, Oswald (ed.) *Life and Meaning* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1988)
Lucretius *On the Nature of the Universe* – many editions and online.
Nagel, Thomas *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: CUP, 1991)

More generally concerning Humanism's approach

Cave, Peter *Humanism: a beginner's guide* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009)
Lawy, Stephen *Very Short Introduction to Humanism* (Oxford: OUP 2011)
Norman, Richard *On Humanism* (London: Routledge, 2004)

Additional references relevant to particular sessions

Seminar One

Hanfling, Oswald *The Quest for Meaning* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1988)
Nagel, Thomas 'Death' in the Nagel collection cited in 'General readings'.

Seminar Two

Glover, Jonathan *Causing Death and Saving Lives* (London: Penguin, 1990)
Hume, David 'On Suicide' – in his essays, many editions and online.
Singer, Peter *Practical Ethics* 2nd ed. (Cambridge: CUP, 1993)

Seminar Three

Hanfling, Oswald *The Quest for Meaning* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1988)
Nagel, Thomas 'Death' in the Nagel collection cited in 'General readings'.

Seminar Four

Cave, Peter *Do Llamas Fall In Love: 33 Perplexing Philosophy Puzzles* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2010),
Chapters 32 and 33
Hanfling, Oswald *The Quest for Meaning* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1988)
Nagel, Thomas 'The Absurd' in the Nagel collection cited in 'General readings'.
Williams, Bernard 'The Makropulos Case' in his *Problems of the Self*. (Cambridge: CUP, 1973)

Online

Many of the quotations given are now online. Here are a couple of examples:

Lucretius's comments on death: http://www.humanistictexts.org/lucretius.htm#_Toc483369278

Nagel's 'Death' paper: http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=fBGPBRX3JsQC&dq=text+thomas-nagel+death&printsec=frontcover&source=in&hl=en&ei=AhBDTPmUFJSI0wSLrMmsDw&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=12&ved=0CD8Q6AEwCw#v=onepage&q&f=false