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The Cost of Dying: Biological Naturalism and the Value of Life

SUN DEMIRLI
Boğaziçi University, Istanbul, Turkey

This paper explores the metaphysical and normative dimensions of death within a biological naturalist framework. It defends the view that persons are contingently identical with their animal bodies and argues that life has only instrumental value—deriving its significance from the experiences, relationships, and projects it enables. On this view, death is not harmful in itself but is a misfortune insofar as it deprives individuals of these goods and interrupts their capacity to engage in meaningful pursuits. The analysis draws on two complementary frameworks: Nagel's deprivation account and the interruption thesis advanced by Furley and Nussbaum. To respond to key Epicurean objections—such as the symmetry argument and the temporality problem—the paper adopts a comparative and atemporal perspective on harm. It further refines the interruption thesis by distinguishing between egocentric and non-egocentric projects, clarifying why posthumous fulfillment of a person's aims does not mitigate the harm of death. By integrating these perspectives, the paper offers a unified account of death's badness: it is a dual harm involving both the loss of potential goods and the personal deprivation of actively shaping and completing one's own life projects.

Keywords: Persons; life; cost of death; deprivation argument; interruption argument.

1. Introduction

What does it mean to be a person, and how should we understand human life? This paper examines these questions through biological naturalism, arguing that personhood arises from cognitive and functional capacities rather than an intrinsic distinction from animal bodies. Life, in this view, holds only instrumental value, serving as a means for individuals to pursue meaningful goals and experiences. Building on this foundation, the paper defends the idea that death is a genuine harm—

not because life itself is inherently valuable, but because it deprives individuals of future goods and disrupts ongoing projects.

The discussion unfolds as follows. Section 2 lays the metaphysical groundwork, beginning with a critique of Jonathan Lowe's non-Cartesian dualism, which posits that people are subjects of experience separate from their biological existence. This view is challenged in favor of a contingent identity thesis inspired by Eric Olson's animalism. The section also examines Peter van Inwagen's argument that life should be understood as an event rather than an object or possession, arguing that human existence is inseparable from biological processes.

With this foundation in place, Section 3 explores the value of life from a naturalist perspective. It argues that life is not intrinsically valuable but is significant because it allows individuals to engage in meaningful experiences. Death, from this standpoint, is a misfortune because it marks the irreversible loss of the capacities that sustain these pursuits.

Section 4 then addresses the Epicurean claim that "death is nothing to us" by defending Nagel's deprivation account. This argument holds that death is harmful because it deprives individuals of the goods of life they would have acquired had they lived longer. The section also tackles two major objections: Lucretius' symmetry argument, which compares pre-birth nonexistence to post-death nonexistence, and the temporality thesis, which questions when the harm of death actually occurs. These objections are refuted by adopting an atemporal perspective, which frames death as a permanent deprivation rather than a harm that occurs at a specific moment.

Building on this, Section 5 examines the interruption thesis, defended by David Furley and Martha Nussbaum, which argues that death is harmful because it disrupts an individual's long-term projects and aspirations. However, this view faces a major challenge: if a person's projects can still be completed after their death, does this lessen the harm of dying? To address this, I introduce a distinction between egocentric and non-egocentric projects, arguing that some pursuits derive their significance from an individual's direct engagement and achievements of them, rather than from their eventual completion. This refinement strengthens the interruption account, showing that death remains harmful even if one's projects are carried forward posthumously.

Finally, Section 6 brings these perspectives together, reinforcing the argument that death is an enduring misfortune. By integrating the deprivation and interruption accounts, this paper provides a dual perspective on why death is not merely the end of life but a significant loss that deprives individuals of both future goods and personal engagement in meaningful pursuits.

2. Metaphysical analysis of people and their lives

2.1. Persons as contingently identical with their animal bodies

Jonathan Lowe argues for a non-Cartesian dualism, suggesting that people are subjects of experience distinct from their animal bodies. According to Lowe, people possess a range of mental capacities—such as feeling pleasure and pain, experiencing emotions like love and hate, forming desires, perceiving the world, thinking, and making plans (1996: 14–51; 2000: 15–18). However, he extends this idea beyond humans, proposing that animals are also subjects of experience. The key distinction, he claims, lies in the first-person perspective: while animals like chimpanzees may have basic cognitive abilities, humans uniquely engage in self-reflection, abstract thought, and deliberate planning (2000: 264).

Lowe maintains that persons constitute a substantial kind—a category of being separate from their physical bodies (2000: 21–24). In his view, the relationship between a person and their body is not one of identity, but rather a special kind of connection he refers to as 'embodiment' (2000: 15–16). He defends this distinction by focusing on differences in persistence conditions: a human organism exists from the third trimester onward and can persist in a vegetative state, whereas a person, in his view, only begins to exist when they develop a first-person perspective—and ceases to exist when they lose it.

To explain embodiment, Lowe draws an analogy from multi-thingism, a view discussed in metaphysics. Consider a statue and the lump of marble from which it is made. They exist in the same location but are considered distinct because they have different modal properties—the statue is essentially shaped as a statue, while the marble could have been shaped into something else (Bennett 2004: 339-40). Lowe believes a similar relationship applies to persons and their bodies: they are not identical but distinct entities coexisting within the same physical space.

2.2. Critique of Lowe's view: The case for contingent identity

While Lowe presents a compelling argument, I disagree with his claim that persons constitute a distinct metaphysical kind separate from their animal bodies. Instead, I argue—consistent with biological naturalism—that personhood arises from the functional and cognitive capacities sustained by the biological organism. This view is inspired by Eric Olson's animalism, which holds that personal identity is rooted in biological continuity.

Olson (1997: 31–37) argues that being a person is a functional role, not a substantial kind. Anything capable of self-awareness, reasoning, and responsibility could qualify as a person. This entails that persons are not necessarily human animals—a sufficient complex algorithm, an alien, or even an immaterial soul could theoretically meet these criteria

(1997: 132). Consequently, the human animal is contingently identical with the person: a human animal may exist before a person comes into being (e.g., in fetal development), and it may persist after the person ceases to exist (e.g., in a persistent vegetative state).

Thus, rather than Lowe's dualistic 'embodiment' model, a more plausible explanation is that persons and their animal bodies are the same entity, but only contingently so—that is, in some hypothetical scenarios, a person could exist in a non-human form or a human animal could exist without being a person.

2.3. A person's life as a special type of event

Before examining the value of life, it is important to clarify what life itself is. We often talk about life as if it were a possession, something we own and fear losing—like wallets. However, life is not an object like a wallet. Nor is it just a chronicle of our lives. Peter van Inwagen (1990) argues that a person's life is best understood as an event rather than an object. He writes:

> ... [Descartes'] life denotes a purely biological event, an event which took place entirely inside ... [Descartes'] skin, and which went on for fifty years. (1990: 83)

From this perspective, Descartes' life was not a thing he possessed—it was the aggregation of countless interconnected biological and mental activities. These included oxygenating hemoglobin, circulating blood, digesting nutrients, perceiving the environment, experiencing sensations of pleasure and pain, forming thoughts, setting goals, and acting on them. His life was the sum of these activities over time.

2.4. What makes life different from other events?

Not all events are self-sustaining and adaptive, but life is. A political rally or a dinner party may be considered events, but unlike life, they are not structurally stable over time. Van Inwagen (1990: 82–97) argues that lives are unique because they possess three defining features:

1. Self-sustaining – The biological processes that maintain life operate continuously and independently.
2. Self-altering – Life is constantly adapting and responding to its environment.
3. Structurally stable – Despite change, an organism retains its identity over long periods.

Van Inwagen's view is a good fit for biological naturalism, supporting the idea that a person is contingently identical with their animal body. Descartes' body, for instance, was a composite of carbon-based molecules engaged in all the activities that constituted his life. Similarly, Descartes as a person was made up of those same molecules, actively engaged in cognitive activities, including decision-making and acting on his decisions.

But what if Descartes had been something other than human animal? Imagine a non-carbon-based alien with a green fluid in its arteries instead of blood, yet possessing the same capacity for thought, experience, and reflection. Would we still consider this being a person? According to the contingent identity view, the answer is yes. In this case, Descartes as a conscious being would be identical with his alien body, just as he was with his human body. His personhood would not depend on the specific biological material composition that constitutes his human body, but rather on the functional capacities that sustain his mental and physical activities.

3. The value of life from a biological naturalist perspective

Now that we've explored what it is to be a person from a biological naturalist perspective, we can turn to our major question: why does life have value?; why is death considered to be a loss? According to this view, a person isn't an inherently separate entity from their body but rather a functional kind, meaning their existence depends on biological and cognitive processes. Life, in this sense, is not a separate 'thing' that a person possesses—instead, it's the sum of all the physical and mental activities, from basic functions like blood circulation and digestion to more complex capacities like thinking, feeling, self-awareness, planning and acting in accordance with those plans. Death, then, is not just an event—it is the complete loss of these capacities, marking the end of both physical processes and the ability to experience the world.

From the biological naturalism standpoint, life does not have intrinsic value but only instrumental value—it is worthwhile only to the extent that it allows people to engage in experiences and pursue goals they find important. By this reasoning, death is not automatically a harm—it is only harmful if it deprives someone of valuable experiences they could have otherwise had.

Of course, not all human capacities contribute equally to making life worthwhile. Nagel (1970: 74) offers an example: imagine two scenarios—one where a person dies instantly and another where they fall into a twenty-year coma before dying. Most people would not side with the coma scenario as the preferable alternative; in fact, they might see it as no better than immediate death. This suggests that simply keeping the body alive—maintaining biological functions—is not what makes life valuable. Instead, what truly matters are the higher-level mental capacities that enable a person to think, perceive, and engage with the world. If those capacities remain intact, life is valuable. But if they are lost—whether through coma or a severe case of dementia—then life no longer holds value for the person.

This leads to the following conclusion: if life is only instrumentally valuable, then death is harmful only when it takes away our cherished

mental capacities. If someone loses the ability to engage with the world in ways they find valuable—whether due to a vegetative state or intense suffering—then life itself may cease to be valuable, and in such cases, death may not necessarily be a misfortune.

4. The Epicurean challenge: Is death really 'nothing to us'?

Does death actually harm the person who dies? Or is it, as Epicurus famously argued, 'nothing to us'? This question is at the heart of an age-old philosophical debate. On one side, biological naturalism suggests that life has only instrumental value—it matters because it allows people to pursue the goods that life can provide. On the other side, Epicurean philosophy claims that death is not a loss at all because once we die, we no longer exist to experience harm. This section examines and critiques the Epicurean argument, particularly in light of Nagel's deprivation account, which offers a strong case for why death is, in fact, a misfortune.

Epicurus presents his reasoning clearly:

> Thus, death, the most feared of all evils, is nothing to us. As long as we exist, death is not present; and when death is present, we no longer exist. Therefore, it concerns neither the living nor the dead, as it is absent for the former and the latter no longer exist. (Letter to Menoeceus)

This argument rests on two key assumptions:

1. Any harm must occur at a specific time. If something is harmful, it must happen while the person is alive.
2. Harm requires a subject. If a person does not exist, they cannot experience suffering or loss.

If these two assumptions are correct, death can never truly be a harm—because once it happens, there is no person left to experience its negative effects.

A major weakness in the Epicurean view is its assumption that harm only exists if someone is there to experience it. But is this always true? Consider an example: David Hume and his destroyed manuscript. Before his death, David Hume entrusted his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, to Adam Smith, telling him to publish it after his death. Suppose Smith had instead burned the manuscript, erasing Hume's final philosophical work from history. Would this have been a misfortune for Hume? Many would argue yes—even though he wasn't alive to witness it.

As Bernard Williams (1973) observes, the 'no misfortune without a subject' thesis is supported by the fact that most things of positive value to a person are conditional on their being alive. Stumbling upon a fortune that promotes well-being has positive value for anyone, but only if the person is alive to enjoy it in the years that follow. Howev-

er, Williams argues that some things have value for a person that are not conditional on their being alive. He calls these categorical values. For Hume, Adam Smith's publishing his manuscript had a categorical value, while Smith's burning the manuscript would be a categorical loss for Hume. According to Williams, remaining alive also is such a categorical good, whereas dying is a categorical loss for the person. Williams, it seems, is correct in his claim that dying is a categorical loss, not conditional on the person being alive.

4.1. Nagel's deprivation account

Before examining the 'temporality thesis'—the claim that any misfortune affecting a person must occur at a specific time—it is important to first consider Thomas Nagel's 'deprivation account'. Nagel (1970), like Bernard Williams, maintains that death constitutes a categorical loss for the individual. He rejects the Epicurean thesis that there can be 'no misfortune without a subject', arguing instead that death is a harm because it deprives the person of the goods and opportunities that life would have otherwise provided. According to Nagel's account, life comprises experiences such as perception, desire, activity, and thought, all of which hold intrinsic value. The longer one lives, the more of these goods one can experience. Death is harmful because it deprives a person of these potential goods—the additional years of life they could have otherwise enjoyed. The cost of death is purely an opportunity cost!

Consider the following example: Alexander Pushkin, who tragically died in a duel at the age of 37. His untimely death deprived him of the future years of joy and success he would have experienced had he lived longer. Nagel's deprivation account involves comparing Pushkin's brief life, which missed out on many intrinsically valuable goods, with an imagined scenario where his life was longer and filled with such rewards. It is natural to contend that in this hypothetical scenario, the value of Pushkin's life would have significantly surpassed its actual value. Thus, when one claims that Pushkin's death was unfortunate for him, they are comparing the value of his short life to hypothetical scenarios in which he lived longer and accumulated some additional values. Similarly, by comparing the potential benefits that Pushkin was deprived of with those that (say) Victor Hugo missed out on after living a long and fruitful life, one can easily conclude that Pushkin's death was far more tragic for him than Hugo's death was for him.

Nagel rejects the 'no misfortune without a subject' thesis by arguing:

> If death is an evil, it is the loss of life, rather than the state of being dead, non-existent, or unconscious, that is objectionable (1970: 74–75).

Stephen Rosenbaum (2000) expands on Nagel's argument by distinguishing between concrete and factual modes of valuation. According

to the concrete mode of valuation, something is good or bad for a person only if it directly affects their state or condition. If an event does not causally affect a person—such as death, which eliminates the capacity to acquire goods —it cannot be considered beneficial or harmful to them. This view goes along with the Epicurean argument that death is not bad for the deceased. In contrast, the factual mode of valuation holds that certain facts about a person can have value regardless of whether they affect their state or condition. From this perspective, the fact that a person dies is inherently bad for them, even if they do not experience it. This fits in with Nagel's argument that death is harmful because it deprives a person of future possibilities.

Rosenbaum argues that these two modes of valuation are not fundamentally contradictory. The apparent conflict stems not from a logical inconsistency but from differing underlying axiological perspectives. While Epicurus, in assuming the 'no misfortune without a subject' thesis, and Nagel, in his deprivation account, appear to hold opposing views, they are in fact addressing different aspects of death. Nagel emphasizes the loss incurred by dying, whereas Epicurus maintains that the state of being dead is neither good nor bad.

Rosenbaum argues that these two modes of valuation often coexist. For instance, the condition of experiencing intense pain typically aligns with the fact that a person is in pain. One could argue that the fact of being in pain is harmful precisely because the experience of pain itself is harmful. As Williams (1970) suggests, some harms depend on the presence of a conscious subject capable of experiencing them. However, as will be remembered, he also contends that certain harms are categorical and do not require a conscious subject to be affected. These categorical harms appear to be cases where the factual and concrete modes of valuation diverge.

The significance of categorical harms can be recognized through cases where factual valuation applies independently of the affected person's awareness or existence. Nagel's example of an individual who suffers brain damage illustrates this point. Likewise, his example of unknown betrayal shows how a person can be harmed by a friend's betrayal, even if they never become aware of it. Cases such as the posthumous destruction of reputation and unknown missed opportunities also exemplify pure categorical harms, as they impact a person's well-being irrespective of their awareness or experience. If a person's reputation is tarnished after their death, many would agree that they have been wronged, even though they are no longer alive to witness it. Similarly, missing an opportunity diminishes the value of one's life compared to what it could have been, even if the individual never realizes the lost opportunity and never considers their life as lacking in any way.

Rosenbaum points out that even though people instinctively see these kinds of harms as serious, it's difficult to argue that something is truly harmful if it never actually affects a person's awareness or well-

being. He contends that most people prioritize concrete harms, such as physical suffering, over abstract harms, like posthumous reputational damage. However, as Rosenbaum must concede, the degree of concern people have for abstract harms does not determine whether those harms are real. The fact that individuals may not actively worry about posthumous reputation or unknown missed opportunities does not eliminate the possibility that such events still constitute genuine harms.

Guy de Maupassant's short story *The Necklace* is a compelling example of missed opportunity harm. In the story, Mathilde Loisel, who aspires to a life in high society, borrows what she believes to be an expensive diamond necklace for a grand ball. When she loses it, she and her husband—too ashamed to admit the mistake—secretly replace it with a costly duplicate, plunging themselves into a decade of financial hardship to pay off the debt. Only years later do they learn the devastating truth: the original necklace was worthless.

Mathilde's whole life was diminished in value because of this misunderstanding. She spent years struggling, believing she had no choice but to endure the hardship. But here's something to think about—would her suffering have been any less tragic if she had never found out the truth? Even if she had died still believing she was paying off a fortune, her life still would have been far worse than it could have been. Just because she didn't know what she lost doesn't mean the loss wasn't real—it just means she never got the chance to see it.

This is exactly what happens with death and deprivation. Just like Mathilde, a person who dies loses out on experiences they could have had—even if they never know what they're missing. The harm of death, much like Mathilde's suffering, exists whether the person realizes it or not.

To conclude, Nagel and Williams are correct in asserting that categorical harms exist—cases where a person can be harmed regardless of their awareness or experience of that harm. These are precisely the instances where factual and concrete valuation diverge. The recognition of purely categorical harms lends strong support to Nagel's deprivation account, which holds that death is a harm to the person, even if no subject remains after death to experience it. This directly undermines the Epicurean claim that there can be no misfortune without a subject.

4.2. Two remaining criticisms of Nagel's deprivation account

I will examine two remaining objections to Nagel's deprivation account. One of these objections is rooted in an argument derived from the writings of the ancient Roman philosopher Lucretius. In *De Rerum Natura*, Lucretius offers a comparison between pre-birth nonexistence and post-death nonexistence:

> Consider how the infinite stretch of time before our birth meant nothing to us. Nature presents this to us as a reflection of the time that will come after

> our death. Is there anything about this that seems frightening or gloomy? Is it not more peaceful than any sleep? (Lucretius 1951)

Lucretius argues that if we don't see our pre-birth nonexistence as a misfortune, why should we view death any differently? Before we were born, we weren't deprived of anything—we simply didn't exist. By the same logic, when we die, we won't be around to experience any loss, so why consider it harmful? In other words, if being born later than we could have been isn't seen as a deprivation, then why should dying earlier than we could have be considered one? If we do not consider our pre-birth nonexistence a loss, should we truly view posthumous nonexistence as a misfortune?

Lucretius emphasizes the symmetry between pre-birth and post-death nonexistence, arguing that both states are characterized by the absence of experience. This *symmetry argument* challenges the claim that death is a misfortune by drawing a direct parallel: if the period before birth is not perceived as a loss, then the period after death should not be considered a deprivation or harm either. A natural extension of this argument is the comparison between missed opportunities due to being born later and those lost due to dying earlier, suggesting that if the former is not considered a harm, neither should the latter.

A second criticism of the deprivation account, known as the *secondary Epicurean puzzle*, challenges the coherence of assigning a specific time to the harm of death. The argument assumes that death is a loss because it deprives a person of the potential goods they would have experienced had their life not been cut short. However, the puzzle arises when attempting to pinpoint when this deprivation occurs. It cannot be said that the individual was deprived while alive, as they were still actively experiencing life. Likewise, it is problematic to claim that deprivation occurs after death, as there is no longer a subject to undergo loss. Yet, for deprivation—like any harm—to be meaningful, it must occur at a particular time, raising a significant challenge to the deprivation account. This relates to the Epicurean 'temporality thesis' which asserts that any misfortune affecting a person must occur at a definite point in time. In addressing these two remaining objections, I will first examine the 'temporality thesis'.

4.3. Temporality thesis

Ben Bradley (2004) agrees with Epicurus on one key point: for death to be a true misfortune, it must happen at a specific time. But unlike Epicurus, Bradley argues that a person doesn't need to exist for the misfortune to apply. To explain his reasoning, Bradley offers a simple example: Imagine I stub my toe at home on the morning of June 10. In the following days, my toe hurts, and I find it uncomfortable to walk. During that period, the stubbed toe is a misfortune because it actively affects my well-being. But once the pain fades, the misfortune disappears—it no longer matters to me.

Bradley extends this logic to death. Take Alexander Pushkin, who died in 1837 at age 37. Bradley argues that Pushkin's death was a loss for him for about 50 years—roughly the time he might have lived had he not died early. But now, centuries later, is it still a loss for Pushkin? According to Bradley, no. The harm of his death 'expired' once the years he could have lived had already passed.

I agree with Bradley's stubbed toe analogy in the sense that some misfortunes fade over time. However, I disagree with his claim that Pushkin's death only mattered for 50 years. In my view, his death remains a misfortune for him forever, regardless of how much time has passed. This disagreement ties into Bernard Williams' distinction between two types of harm. Conditional harms depend on a person's experience and exist only within a specific timeframe—such as the pain of a stubbed toe, which fades over time and eventually becomes irrelevant once the person is no longer affected. Categorical harms, by contrast, do not require a subject to experience them and remain harmful regardless of how much time has passed—such as death. Even though the deceased can no longer feel their loss, the harm persists because it represents a permanent deprivation of what could have been.

Bradley treats death as if it were a stubbed toe—a conditional harm that stops being a misfortune once the hypothetical years of lost life have come and gone. But if we take Pushkin's death as a categorical harm, then it is always a misfortune for him—because no matter how much time passes, the fact remains that he was deprived of life and everything he could have experienced.

By contrast, I argue that death is a categorical harm, a misfortune that doesn't fade over time but instead remains a permanent loss. To see why, let's compare two historical figures: Alexander Pushkin and Leo Tolstoy. Pushkin died young, at 37, while Tolstoy lived a long and accomplished life until 1910. There's no doubt that Pushkin was less fortunate—but at what point can we say he suffered this misfortune? Their lives overlapped for only a few years, with Pushkin dying when Tolstoy was still a toddler.

The truth is, Pushkin has always been less fortunate than Tolstoy, because his early death permanently deprived him of the life he could have lived. Unlike temporary misfortunes that depend on someone being alive to experience them, death isn't about when or for how long the loss is felt—it's about what is lost forever. Pushkin's early death isn't just a tragic event that mattered only in 1837; it is a permanent, irreversible deprivation that remains true at any moment in history.

This challenges Bradley's view that death is only a harm for a set period after a person dies. Instead, it aligns with Nagel's deprivation account, which holds that death is always a misfortune because it permanently takes away life's possibilities, no matter how much time has passed.

Feldman (1991) also, a strong supporter of Nagel's deprivation account, argues that an early death is always a misfortune, but to understand why, we need to stop thinking about harm as something that happens at a specific moment in time. Feldman's analysis for the atemporality of categorical harms is compelling, and he begins his analysis by drawing a distinction between intrinsic misfortunes, which are immediate and temporary (like stubbing a toe), and comparative misfortunes, which remain bad for someone even if there's no clear point in time when they occur. This idea is closely related to Bernard Williams' distinction between conditional and categorical harms.

To explain this, Feldman gives an example: Dolores moves to Bolivia. Was this move a bad thing for her? Feldman argues that the only way to tell is by comparing her actual life in Bolivia to a hypothetical version where she stayed in the U.S.. If she would have been better off in those alternate realities, then moving to Bolivia was always bad for her, even if there was never a single moment when the harm took place (1991: 213).

Feldman's atemporal account also provides a compelling response to the Secondary Epicurean Puzzle. This puzzle challenges the deprivation account by questioning when the harm of death actually occurs. If death is a misfortune because it deprives a person of the potential goods they would have had, then one must identify the specific time at which this deprivation takes place. It cannot be during life, since the person is still actively experiencing it, nor can it be after death, since there is no longer a subject to undergo loss. This issue appears to cast doubt on the deprivationist claim that death is a genuine harm.

Feldman's analysis challenges the idea that harm must happen at a specific moment in time. He argues that just as we can't pinpoint a single moment when moving to Bolivia was bad for Dolores, we also can't pinpoint a single moment when death is bad for the person who dies. Instead, both are comparative misfortunes—they are bad because, in an alternate possibility where things happened differently, the person would have been better off. In the case of death, the harm isn't about a particular event or a single point in time—it's about the entire existence of the person. If they had lived longer, they would have experienced more, making their actual death a misfortune when compared to those alternative possibilities.

So just as there's no exact moment when Dolores' move became unfortunate, there's no single moment when death is harmful—but that doesn't mean it isn't a loss. Death remains a permanent deprivation, an enduring misfortune that exists not because of when it happens, but because of what is taken away. This way of thinking dissolves the Secondary Epicurean Puzzle, proving that deprivation doesn't need to be tied to a specific timeframe to be real. It is a harm that exists regardless of whether the person is aware of it—it is true simply because of what they have lost.

4.4. Lucretius' puzzle

Now, let's turn to Lucretius' Puzzle. Think again about Pushkin, who died at the peak of his career at just 37 years old. His early death was clearly a misfortune—it deprived him of all the experiences he could have had if he had lived a longer life. But what if we looked at things from the other direction? Suppose Pushkin had been born earlier, say in 1750 instead of 1799. Wouldn't that have also given him more years of life? If dying too soon is a loss, then why don't we see being born later than we could have been as a misfortune too?

This is where the asymmetry problem comes in. We naturally view early death as a misfortune, but we don't feel the same way about late birth—even though both deprive a person of potential years of life. If we can't explain why we treat these two cases differently, then the entire deprivation account of death's harm could be undermined.

Feldman (1991) addresses this asymmetry by arguing that it's simply a matter of psychology—not fact. He believes we react differently to early death and late birth because of the way we think about time, not because there's an actual difference in the harm they cause. According to him, both early death and late birth take away the same amount of life, but for psychological reasons that are rooted in our experience of time we only see early death as tragic. Feldman claims this reaction is irrational—after all, a life can be extended in two ways: by adding years to the beginning or to the end.

Nagel (1970), however, rejects this view. He believes that there really is a fundamental difference between early death and late birth, and that's why we aren't being irrational when we treat them differently. His argument is that it is impossible for someone to be born earlier than they actually were. If 'they' had been earlier, 'they' would have been a completely different person. On the other hand, it is entirely possible for someone to have lived longer than they actually did. As Nagel puts it: "Anyone born substantially earlier than he was would have been someone else" (Nagel 1970: 79). This means that while dying early deprives you of the life you could have had, being born later doesn't deprive you in the same way—because you wouldn't exist any earlier than you actually did.

As I argued in Section 2, a person is defined not just as a biological entity but as a functional kind—which means that, even if a specific human body couldn't have been born earlier, it might still be possible for the person to have come into existence at an earlier time. However, whether we accept or reject the asymmetry, Lucretius' Puzzle ultimately fails to undermine the deprivation account.

To summarize, death is a misfortune because it takes away the potential goods one would have enjoyed if they had not died, and this remains true regardless of whether the person is aware of their loss. Arguments like the temporality thesis and Lucretius' symmetry problem attempt to challenge this, but comparative and atemporal reason-

ing show why they fail. Ultimately, Nagel's deprivation account offers the best explanation of why death is a lasting misfortune, rejecting the Epicurean claim that death is "nothing to us".

5. David Furley's interruption of life thesis

Furley (1986) argues that death is harmful because it disrupts the flow of our lives—cutting short the goals, projects, and ambitions that give life its value. His argument directly challenges the Epicurean claim that death is 'nothing to us'. As he puts it:

> The badness of death lies not in any posthumous suffering, but in the way it cuts short endeavors and aspirations that structure our life. An artist's unfinished masterpiece, a scientist's incomplete research—these are examples of how death frustrates a life's trajectory. (Furley 1986: 82)

Furley sees life as a narrative, shaped by long-term plans and projects that unfold over time. We invest in the future, pursue meaningful endeavors, and structure our lives around goals that require time to develop and fulfill. But death abruptly shatters this structure, cutting us off midstream—leaving ambitions unfulfilled and incomplete. Even if we never consciously experience this interruption, the objective structure of our life is still broken (Furley, 1986: 86–88).

Building on Furley's argument, Martha Nussbaum (2013) expands the interruption thesis, drawing from her Aristotelian perspective on human flourishing. Like Furley, she rejects the Epicurean view that death is nothing to us, arguing instead that life's value is inseparable from the pursuit of meaningful, long-term projects. According to her, human flourishing depends on our ability to fulfill and complete intrinsically valuable endeavors. This is precisely why death is harmful—because it cuts us off before we can finish our cherished projects and plans. Thus, "it fragments the coherent arc of a person's life, leaving behind unfinished stories, incomplete dreams, and disrupted ambitions" (Nussbaum 2013: 176–78).

The interruption account provides an alternative to Nagel's more traditional deprivation account. Nagel's deprivation account states that death is bad because it deprives the person of goods of life they could have, whereas the interruption account claims that death is bad because it disrupts the goals and projects that the individual deems to be intrinsically valuable. The interruption account offers an alternative to Nagel's traditional deprivation account.

The deprivation and interruption accounts operate independently; that is, a person's death can be harmful under one framework while not necessarily constituting harm under the other. For example, if an individual has no expectations of future goods due to illness and suffering, their death may not be considered a deprivation in Nagel's sense. However, from the perspective of the interruption account, their life may still hold significance because death would prevent them from completing projects they intrinsically value. Conversely, a person who

lives entirely in the present, without pursuing long-term goals or projects, may not be harmed in the sense of interruption. Yet, their life remains significant under the deprivation account, as death would still rob them of potential goods they could have otherwise enjoyed.

In defending the deprivation account, I argued that it remains immune to the Epicurean challenge, which attempts to undermine it by relying on two key assumptions: the 'temporality thesis'—that every harm must occur at a specific time—and the 'no harm without a subject' thesis. Likewise, the interruption account can be defended against these same objections using similar reasoning. Death constitutes a loss because it prevents the completion of goals and projects that hold intrinsic value for the individual. Even if there is no subject to experience this loss at the moment death occurs, the interruption remains a harm from an 'atemporal perspective', as it permanently severs the continuity of meaningful pursuits.

5.1. Biological naturalism as the foundational framework for the interruption account

Biological naturalism, as presented in Section 2, serves as a foundational framework for the interruption account, just as it does for the deprivation account. Within this framework, a person is contingently identical to their human animal body, and their life consists of various activities, including higher-level cognitive functions such as forming thoughts, setting goals, and acting upon them. Most individuals engage in projects, such as raising children, contributing to the well-being of their community through their professions, composing music, or writing novels and philosophical treatises—each of which holds intrinsic value for them. Accordingly, while life itself is not intrinsically valuable, an individual's life derives significance from the value they assign to their personal projects.

Take parenting as an example. If someone sees raising their child as one of their life's most important achievements, the value they place on their own existence is directly tied to this project. Consequently, the personal cost of death for the parent should reflect, or in most cases exceed, the significance they attach to this undertaking.

5.2. The problem of posthumous project completion

The interruption account, grounded in biological naturalism, faces a significant challenge: how do we measure the harm of death when life's worth is tied to personal projects? The link between the harm of death and the value an individual assigns to their projects can be questioned. Suppose a parent deeply values raising a happy and prosperous child but tragically dies while the child is still an infant. If the child is subsequently raised by a foster family exactly as the deceased parent would have intended, does this diminish the harm of the parent's death? This

scenario suggests that while individuals place great importance on their projects, the worth of their life is not necessarily determined by the mere realization and completion of their projects.

This challenge exposes the major assumption in Furley's and Nussbaum's interruption accounts—namely, that the significance of life is derived from the pursuit and completion of temporally extended projects. Furley (1986: 86–88) argues that human life has a narrative structure, and death is harmful because it disrupts this narrative, preventing individuals from completing their aspirations. Nussbaum (2013: 176–78) expands on this idea, asserting that human flourishing requires the completion of valuable personal projects and that death is harmful because it leaves these projects unfinished.

However, the parent example complicates this view. This suggests that the harm of death cannot be explained solely by project interruption. The missing element is the individual's personal participation in achieving the project's completion—something that remains uniquely tied to their agency. The interruption account, as it stands, struggles to explain this.

5.3. Egocentric vs. non-egocentric projects: A refinement of the interruption account

In resolving the problem of posthumous project completion, I argue that there is a crucial distinction between the mere realization of a project and an individual's personal achievement in fulfilling it. This distinction is rooted in the contrast between egocentric and non-egocentric facts. And this distinction parallels the well-known distinction between egocentric and non-egocentric knowledge.

David Lewis (1979), in his paper "Attitudes De Dicto and De Se", illustrates this distinction with his famous "two gods" example. He describes two gods: one lives atop the tallest mountain and throws down manna, while the other resides on the coldest mountain and hurls thunderbolts. Although both gods are omniscient and know all non-egocentric facts about the world, neither knows which god they are. That is, they lack egocentric knowledge of their own identity and actions. They do not know whether they reside on the tallest or coldest mountain, or whether they throw manna or thunderbolts. Egocentric knowledge is thus a distinct category that cannot be reduced to objective, non-egocentric knowledge.

While Lewis applies this distinction only to knowledge, I extend it to facts themselves. Just as there are facts about the world that exist independently of individual perspectives (non-egocentric facts), there are also facts that are inherently tied to an individual's experience and agency (egocentric facts).

Applying this distinction to the interruption account clarifies the posthumous success problem. A parent does not only value the fact that their child is raised well (non-egocentric fact) but also their personal

achievement in raising the child (egocentric fact). The latter holds significance precisely because it depends on the individual's agency and active participation. The harm of death does not disappear simply because someone else completes a person's valued projects. The parent's personal achievement in raising their child is lost upon their death, and this loss is distinct from whether the project itself is ultimately realized.

This refined account strengthens the interruption theory by clarifying why posthumous success does not eliminate the harm of death. The loss caused by death is not merely about interruption but about the deprivation of egocentric achievements—a crucial element Furley and Nussbaum fail to account for. Furthermore, this view bridges the gap between the interruption and deprivation accounts. The harm of death is not just about the incompleteness of a life narrative (as Furley and Nussbaum claim), nor merely about the deprivation of future goods (as Nagel argues). Rather, it involves both dimensions simultaneously: Death deprives a person of the ability to complete their own valuable projects (interruption) while also depriving them of life's potential goods (deprivation).

6. Conclusion

This paper has explored what it means to be a person, the nature of life, and the harm of death through the lens of biological naturalism. I have argued that persons are not separate from their biological bodies but are instead contingently identical with them. This perspective allows us to understand life as a structured, interconnected activities—one that sustains our capacity for thought, self-awareness, and planned action.

When considering the value of life, I have defended the idea that life is not intrinsically valuable, but rather valuable because of what it enables us to do—to engage in meaningful experiences, relationships, and projects. Death is a harm because it takes these away. However, this harm can be understood in two different ways:

1. Nagel's deprivation account, which argues that death is bad because it robs a person of the experiences they could have had.
2. Furley and Nussbaum's interruption account, which holds that death is harmful because it disrupts the narrative of one's life, cutting off projects before they are completed.

Both perspectives help explain why death is bad, but the interruption account faces a key challenge—the posthumous success problem. If a person's projects can still be completed after they die, does that mean death is less of a harm? I have argued that not all projects derive their value from completion alone. Some—especially egocentric projects—only hold meaning when the individual is actively engaged in them. This distinction refines the interruption account, showing that death remains harmful even when one's work continues posthumously, be-

cause it deprives the person of the deeply personal experience of achievement.

By bringing together Nagel's deprivation thesis with this refined interruption account, I have presented a more complete framework for understanding why death is a misfortune. Death is not just about lost opportunities—it is about being cut off from our own ability to shape and engage with our lives. This dual perspective resolves objections to both accounts, reinforcing the argument that death remains a genuine harm—whether or not the deceased is aware of it and regardless of whether their projects continue posthumously.

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