

## Secular Hopes in the Face of Death

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Many religions offer hope for a life that transcends death and believers find great comfort in this. Non-believers typically do not have such hopes. In the face of death, they may find consolation in feeling contented with the life they have lived. But do they have hopes? I will identify a range of distinctly *secular hopes* at the end of life. Nothing stops religious people from sharing these secular hopes, in addition to their hope for eternal life. I will distinguish between (a) hopes about one's life, (b) hopes about one's death, (c) hopes about attitudes of others, and (d) hopes about the future. But before turning to these hopes, I will reflect on the following question: What is it that would keep a person from hoping for eternal life?

### Why Would One not Hope for Eternal Life?

I have argued in "The Value of Hope"<sup>1</sup> that to hope for something is (a) to believe that it is neither certain nor impossible, (b) to desire it, and (c) to be mentally engaged with it, say, by daydreaming about it or imagining how great it would be. As to (a), if I believe something to be certain, then I can look forward to it, but I cannot hope for it; if I take it to be impossible, I can wish that it would be so, but I cannot hope for it. As to (b), clearly I do not hope for things that I

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<sup>1</sup> Luc Bovens, "The Value of Hope," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 59 (1999): 667–681.

do not at least in some respect desire. As to (c), think of the prospect that a loved one might stop by. I am not hoping for this to happen unless I do at least some daydreaming about how great it would be, picture the things we might do together, etc.

What first comes to mind as to why one would not hope for eternal life is that one embraces a world view that excludes the supernatural. I may consider eternal life to be simply impossible. In this case we can at best *wish* that eternal life were awaiting. But what if we consider it possible, yet rather unlikely? This epistemic attitude does not exclude hope, but the less one believes, the more one's hopes merge into wishing.

What stops a person from hoping for eternal life need not be strictly cognitive. It may well be the case that one simply lacks the desire for eternal life. When Einstein was asked, "Do you believe in immortality?" he responded, "No, and one life is enough for me."<sup>2</sup> The exchange has the same structure as: "Do you think that there is more beer in the fridge? No, and one beer is enough for me." This expression indicates that the speaker neither believes that the object under discussion exists, nor that she has any desire for it.

The lack of desire for eternal life may come from a dark disposition toward one's own life or toward human life in general. A person may desire not to have existed at all or for humanity not to have existed at all, so why would she desire *eternal* life? But it need not be a morose attitude that underlies this lack of desire. Following Williams's reflections on the life of the fictional Elina Makropulos, one may think that an endless life would become tedious and

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Isaacson, *Einstein: His Life and Universe*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007), Ch. 17 with reference in footnote 4 to George Sylvester Viereck, *Glimpses of the Great*. (New York: Macauley, 1930), 372–8.

devoid of meaning.<sup>3</sup> Or one may simply find beauty in the ephemeral character of life or find the desire for eternal life to be rooted in an unfitting sense of self-importance.

Finally, one may find the whole notion of eternal life too foreign and incomprehensible for hoping. Eternal life may strike one as a possibility and an object of desire, yet there is nothing to go on when it comes to imagining what it would be like and this is what prevents hoping. Dickinson writes that the prospect of immortality is “so huge, so hopeless to conceive.”<sup>4</sup> The Preacher in Ecclesiastes 3:22 asks himself, “Who shall bring [a man] to see what will be after him?” and concludes that the better thing for man to do is “to rejoice in his own work; for that is his portion”<sup>5</sup> rather than, I might add, dwelling on eternal life. Compare: A child may hope very much for her yearly upcoming trip to the local beach resort. But she may be much less excited when told that the family is going to some exotic place next summer—she may believe and desire it, since she knows that her parents always take her on fun trips. But she has nothing to go on in daydreaming about it and hence can hardly be said to be hoping for it.

Let us now turn to the first type of secular hope in the face of death.

### Hopes about One’s Life

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<sup>3</sup> Bernard Williams, “The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality,” in: Bernard Williams, *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 82–100.

<sup>4</sup> Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1924; Bartleby.com, 2000. [www.bartleby.com/113/](http://www.bartleby.com/113/). Part One: Life. XCVI. <http://www.bartleby.com/113/1096.html>. Accessed 1 June 2017.

<sup>5</sup> *Bible*. Authorized King James Version. Ecclesiastes 3: 22. <https://www.biblegateway.com/>. Accessed 1 June 2017.

I might say: I hope that I have lived a worthwhile life. What is it that could validate the claim that one's life was worthwhile? Consider the following passage from a letter by Keats to Fannie Brawne:

Now I have had opportunities of passing nights anxious and awake I have found other thoughts intrude upon me. "If I should die," said I to myself, "I have left no immortal work behind me - nothing to make my friends proud of my memory - but I have loved the principle of beauty in all things, and if I had had time I would have made myself remembered."<sup>6</sup>

This quote brings out an interesting tension. Should we have made a mark in order to make our lives worthwhile? Or is what matters that we live our lives in a particular fashion? Keats believed that because he would die so young (due to tuberculosis), he had not been able to make a mark. But he sees the worth of his life in living it in accordance with an aesthetic principle. Others might say that they have lived with integrity, with honesty, with love, with passion, etc. They also consider their lives worthwhile precisely because they lived in accordance with ideals that they subscribe to or identify with.

How does this leave room for hope? In looking back on life, a person may have doubts because she is not fully transparent to herself. She may hope that she has lived a life of integrity but at the same time fear that self-interest was often no less of driving force. An artist may hope that she lived a life of aesthetic appreciation, but at the same time fear that she was a phony at

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<sup>6</sup> John Keats, "To Fanny Brawne – February 1820 (?)" <http://www.john-keats.com/briefe/000220.htm>. Accessed 1 June 2017.

heart. A philanthropist may hope that she was motivated by empathy, but at the same time fear that she really was after fame and recognition.

A concern to live one's life according to some ideal is quite different from a concern to have made a mark. In "An Atheist in a Foxhole,"<sup>7</sup> David Rönnegard, a humanist philosopher who was diagnosed with stage-four cancer at a relatively young age, asks: "looking in the rear-view mirror, how do I feel about what I leave behind?" What gives him a sense of "a life fully lived" are "the sentiments ... that spring from events that touched the lives of others." These "footprints we leave behind" can take many forms for different people, such as "the friendships we maintain, the children we give birth to, the enterprises we start, and the books we write." Making a mark is about making a difference to the lives of other people. Rönnegard writes that beyond this, "conceptual precision may need to give way" and "poetry might take over where analytic philosophy ends." I will try to push on a bit further with philosophy and, be it with the help of some poetry, draw two further distinctions within this notion of *making a mark*.

The other day, I was talking to a retired medical doctor who spends his days in archives doing genealogy. With some pride he told me that the only mark he had made in his life was the construction of a particular family tree. Now, to each their own, but genealogy always seemed an inch away from trainspotting to me. A genealogist constructs a concatenation of names of people related by family links, whereas a trainspotter constructs a concatenation of names of trains related by logistic links. At the same time, I have always felt envious of the medical profession when it comes to giving meaning to life. If healing the sick and relieving suffering does not give meaning to life, then what does? So I responded: "What about your patients?" He shrugged and

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<sup>7</sup> David Rönnegard, "An Atheist in a Foxhole," *Philosophy Now*, Oct/Nov 2015. [https://philosophynow.org/issues/105/Atheist\\_In\\_A\\_Foxhole](https://philosophynow.org/issues/105/Atheist_In_A_Foxhole). Accessed 1 June 2017.

responded: “Nothing of that will remain – most of them are dead by now and all of them will die someday”.

This dialogue reveals the distinction between the *enduring* and the *ephemeral*. Some people consider their lives only worthwhile if they have left an enduring trace. The ephemeral does not suffice, whatever its value may be at the moment of delivery. In Ode 3:30 Horace gives expression to a writer’s aspiration to make a lasting mark, to gain immortality through their art. Here is the first part of the Ode:

I have finished a monument more eternal than bronze  
and taller than the kingly site of the pyramids,  
which no gnawing rain, nor fierce North wind  
can destroy, nor countless rank of years  
nor the flight of years.  
Not entirely shall I die; and a great part of me  
will evade Lady Death; ever after I  
shall arise, renewed by praise,  
so long as the Pontifex ascends the Capitoline  
accompanied by the silent virgin.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The translation is from Ellen Brundige, “Horace 3:30: On Immortality,” in the blog *Hubpages*, updated 15 January 2015. <http://mythphile.hubpages.com/hub/horace-odes-3-30>. Accessed 1 June 2017. For a more literal translation, see Horace, *The Odes and Carmen Saeculare*, John Conington, trans., (London: George Bell and Sons. 1882) <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=urn:cts:latinLit:phi0893.phi001.perseus-eng1:3.30>. Accessed 1 June 2017.

Other people find their lives worthwhile because of the value that is embodied in fleeting moments. Imagine a DJ who can throw the greatest parties. She can make the dance floor burn until the early morning hours. In old age the DJ may look back and say that those parties just made it all worthwhile. Nothing remains, but who cares? There was great beauty in the ephemeral.

The second distinction is the distinction between making *grand* and *small* marks. Let's start with the Emily Dickinson poem:

If I can stop one heart from breaking,  
I shall not live in vain;  
If I can ease one life the aching,  
Or cool one pain,  
Or help one fainting robin  
Unto his nest again,  
I shall not live in vain.<sup>9</sup>

Dickinson, unlike Keats, did not strive to do grand things – at least not in the persona she assumes in her poetry. What gave worth to her life were small differences—with helping a fainting robin being paradigmatic. Neither did she care much for the grandeur of being in the

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<sup>9</sup> Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1924; Bartleby.com, 2000) Part One: Life. VI. <http://www.bartleby.com/113/1006.html>. Accessed 1 June 2017.

public eye: “How dreary to be somebody!/ How public like a frog/ To tell one's name the livelong day/ To an admiring bog!”<sup>10</sup>

There are many conceptions of making grand mark. Being in the public eye is one way, but it is not the only way. Consider raising a family. This is certainly a grand thing to do and one may indeed look back on one's life and say that raising one's family well is what made it all worthwhile. But others would shrug and say that this does not make one stand out from the crowd. It is what millions of people are doing right now and have done before. For them, making something of oneself requires doing something out of the ordinary. They measure the extent to which their lives are worthwhile by the more or less extraordinary things they have done.

The distinctions between the enduring and the ephemeral and between the grand and the small are not independent. Grand things tend to endure, whereas small things tend to fade away. But this is not always the case. There are things that are grand yet ephemeral, such as the DJ who could throw the greatest parties. There are things that are enduring yet make only a small difference. This is the case when we see the small things we do as worthwhile because they are part of a greater scheme that will stand the test of time. There is the old Chinese story of moving the mountains. A foolish old man wants to move mountains by moving small loads of stones. When a wise man mocks him, he responds that his descendants will carry on his work and that the mountains will eventually be moved.<sup>11</sup> Scientists may see their professional life in this light –

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<sup>10</sup> Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1924; Bartleby.com, 2000) Part One: Life. XXVII. <http://www.bartleby.com/113/1027.html>. Accessed 1 June 2017.

<sup>11</sup> Sandra Giddens and Owen Giddens, *Chinese Mythology* (New York: The Rosen Publishing Group, 2006), 39. <https://books.google.com/books?id=mW17LwByW-cC&pg=PA39>. Accessed 1 June 2017.

their contributions may have been small, but they are worthwhile because they are part of a larger endeavor or an enduring pursuit.

Whether we find meaning in the ephemeral or the enduring or in the small or the grand, there is always some uncertainty that leaves room for hope.

This is certainly the case if I aim for the *grand and enduring*. If I wish to live on through my art, my heart may sink when I see styles change and auction prices drop. I have no control over future tastes and all I can do is to hope that my work will not be buried and forgotten.<sup>12</sup>

The *small and ephemeral* has the virtue of greater epistemic certainty. If, with Dickinson, one finds meaning in the beauty of a loving gesture, then, as the saying goes, they can't take that away from you. There is often little doubt that the uptake of such gestures was as intended and this leaves us with a sense of satisfaction. This category is close to living in accordance with certain ideals. Dickinson might say that she strives to live her life with empathy. In this respect she resembles Keats in that she takes the worth of her life to lie in the attitude with which it was lived.

Kieran Setiya tries to understand what is at the core of a midlife crisis. He appeals to Aristotle's distinction between *telic* and *atelic* activities in the *Metaphysics*  $\theta$ . A telic activity is an activity that aims at an end that is outside of the activity itself and that can be completed, whereas atelic activities are the things we do for their own sake and are not geared towards completion. What sets off a midlife crisis is that one sees one's life as a concatenation of telic activities brought to completion and all that one can say in response is: "So now what?" Setiya's advice is to structure one's telic activities in the service of atelic activities. For example, we

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<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of why some authors are forgotten and some are remembered, see H. J. Jackson, *Those who Write for Immortality: Romantic Reputations and the Dream of Lasting Fame* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015).

should take up the telic activity of doing a joint project in order to engage in the atelic activity of hanging out with friends.<sup>13</sup>

This is helpful in understanding the connection between small marks and living in accordance with certain ideals. Those who find meaning in making small marks typically structure their telic activities in function of an atelic activity such as leading a life of empathy, or simply leading a decent life. Small marks stand to living in accordance with certain ideals as being successful at small telic activities stands to an atelic activity. The telic activities (helping the fainting robin into its nest) are the things we do to engage in an atelic activity (living a caring life) and this atelic activity is what gives meaning to the telic activities.

The *small and enduring* invites the hope that the grand project will endure over generations and that the small stones that we carried will be part of the big mountains that need moving. Setiya's distinction is relevant here as well. We can find meaning in the success of small telic activities by seeing them in the context of an atelic enduring activity. For example, our hope to have made a small contribution to science can be understood within the context of seeing oneself as a participant in the enduring life of the mind.

The *grand and ephemeral* invites its own kind of hopes. After hosting a party, one might say: "I sure hope that people had a good time!" Similarly, the DJ may hope that these raves she played for really were all they were cracked up to be.

In *Death and the Afterlife*, Samuel Scheffler argues that the existence of a "collective afterlife", that is, future generations succeeding us here on earth, are essential to giving meaning

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<sup>13</sup> Kieran Setiya, "The Midlife Crisis," *Philosophers' Imprint*, vol. 14, no. 31 (2014).

to our lives.<sup>14</sup> In their responses, Susan Wolf<sup>15</sup> and Harry Frankfurt<sup>16</sup> argue that people would still manage to find meaning in various activities, e.g. caring, friendship, music, intellectual activities, and puzzle-solving, even if they knew that they were the last generation. This connects to our discussion of making a mark. Hopes that one has made enduring marks are dependent on the existence of a collective afterlife. In contrast, hopes that one has lived a life that measures up to certain ideals or that one has made ephemeral marks (be they small or grand), are not dependent on a collective afterlife.

Scheffler responds that our inability to forge links to a future would lead to a sense of despair that makes it difficult to enjoy even the momentary pleasures. But this presupposes that one at least partly derives meaning from making a difference that is contingent on there being a collective afterlife. If what most matters to a person is the atelic activity of, say, having led a life of aesthetic appreciation or a decent life, or telic activities leaving only ephemeral marks, such as helping the fainting robin or setting the dance floor on fire, then the loss of a collective afterlife would matter very little indeed to the meaning we give to our own lives. This does not mean that we would be indifferent to the world's predicament—we may find it tragic that human life will come to an end, but finding it tragic is not tantamount to thinking our own lives are thereby less worthwhile.

### Hopes about One's Death

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<sup>14</sup> Samuel Scheffler, "Death and the Afterlife," in Samuel Scheffler and Niko Kolodny, *Death and the Afterlife* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>15</sup> Susan Wolf, "The Significance of Doomsday," in *ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Harry Frankfurt, "Why the Afterlife Matters," in *ibid.*

There are two distinct hopes with respect to our own death. First, we may hope to die well. And second, we may hope that our death will not be in vain.

### Hoping to Die Well

We may hope to die in a way that is expressive of the ideals that we stood for in our lifetime. Aristotle includes “a death worthy of [one’s] life” and “dying as befits one’s life” in his description of the happy life.<sup>17</sup> A brave person dislikes the thought of death due to disease or at sea (unless he is a sailor), because it does not provide “the opportunity of showing prowess” and it would not be a noble death. What a brave person is concerned with (and presumably hopes for) is to die courageously in battle, since this is both a noble death and permits a display of courage and skill.<sup>18</sup>

In Cacoyannis’ film *Iphigenia*<sup>19</sup>, adapted from Euripides’ play *Iphigenia at Aulis*, he places Iphigenia in the chaos of an argument of how she could be saved from being sacrificed. She steps forward and says: “Today I will die. I cannot avoid it. But how I will die, only I can decide. And I have decided. I will die peacefully, proudly, and beautifully. This will be for me some kind of victory.” Iphigenia hoped to die in a way that fits her ideal of a life lived well.

This concern is present in opting for not opting for euthanasia at the end of life (where the law permits such choices). I may opt for euthanasia because I value autonomous agency and I

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<sup>17</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, W.D. Ross, trans., Internet Classics Archive, Bk I, Section 10. <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachaen.1.i.html>.

<sup>18</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, W.D. Ross, trans., Internet Classics Archive, Bk III, Section 6. <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachaen.3.iii.html>. Accessed 1 June 2017.

<sup>19</sup> *Iphigenia*. Film by Michael Cacoyannis 1977. 1:46-1:47. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y0jBDCt-kD4>. Accessed 1 June 2017.

do not want to see my body helplessly deteriorate any further. I might say that I hope to die with dignity. On the other hand, I may not opt for euthanasia because I believe that only God can take a life. I might say that I hope to die in God's hands.

People also hope to die in circumstances or at a time that is reflective of what they value in life or that is symbolic of something that they stand for or identify with. This can take many forms. Some hope to die surrounded by their families or in the comfort of their homes. Some hope to die on Independence Day, on a particular Saint's Day, etc. Mark Twain was born in the year of Halley's Comet and hoped to die in the year of its return. He wrote in 1909:

I came in with Halley's Comet in 1835. It is coming again next year, and I expect to go out with it. It will be the greatest disappointment of my life if I don't go out with Halley's Comet. The Almighty has said, no doubt: 'Now here are these two unaccountable freaks; they came in together, they must go out together.' Oh! I am looking forward to that.<sup>20</sup>

His hopes were met when he died in 1910 due to heart failure. Mark Twain was a great storyteller and he saw dying in the year of the return of Halley's Comet as a way to go that would give the world yet one more story.

J. David Velleman writes that he does not want death "to catch [him] napping" since he considers it to be a "momentous life event".<sup>21</sup> There is a curious contrast between people. Some

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<sup>20</sup> Albert Bigelow Paine (1912) *Mark Twain. A Biography 1835-1910, Complete. The Personal and Literary Life of Samuel Longhorne Clemens* (New York: Harper and Bros, 1912) Ch. 282. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2988/2988-h/2988-h.htm>. Accessed 1 June 2017.

<sup>21</sup> J. David Velleman "Dying," *Think*, 11 (2012), 29-32. doi:10.1017/ S147717561200022X. Accessed 1 June 2017.

hope to die suddenly, preferably doing what they like to do best, say skiing or hunting or just typing away on their laptops. Others hope to die while seeing it all coming from far ahead, preferably painlessly of course, but with ample warning. What is it that sets these people apart? Are people who believe in eternal life more inclined to hope for preparation time, since they believe that there is something after death and hence something to prepare for? Does being a more competitive type-A personality correlate with hoping to die suddenly and does being a more relaxed type-B personality correlate with hoping to die with ample preparation time? Is there a difference between the young, the middle-aged and the old in this respect? These are questions that would merit an empirical study.

#### Hoping that One's Death Will not Be in Vain

Tony Hancock joked: "Does Magna Carta mean nothing to you? Did she die in vain?"<sup>22</sup> Humor aside, one may hope that one's death will do some good, advancing some cause that one believes in. Soldiers tend to hope that their untimely deaths will advance the war effort. If I volunteer for a randomized control trial of an experimental drug in an advanced stage of cancer and the treatment is not effective, then I hope that my death will at least contribute to the advancement of science.

We may also feel uncertainty about the very cause we are fighting for. Kahlil Gibran writes: "A woman protested saying: 'Of course it was a righteous war. My son fell in it.'"<sup>23</sup> A

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<sup>22</sup> "Twelve Angry Men" BBC-TV Series 5 of "Hancock's Half Hour". First broadcast 16 Oct 1959. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JNZosqiJISs>. Accessed 1 June 2017.

<sup>23</sup> Kahlil Gibran, *Sand and Foam* (New York: Knopf, 1926) <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks05/0500611h.html>. Accessed 1 June 2017.

soldier may hope that his or her death is serving a *righteous* cause. One does not want to die being mistaken about the moral worth of the cause that one chose to die for.

In Belgium and the Netherlands there have been a number of cases in which people ask for euthanasia wanting to be an organ donor. They hope that their death will give other people a new lease on life. These are mainly patients who are affected by ALS or MS. There are some drawbacks: ALS and MS patients who ask to be euthanized typically choose to die at home, but if they wish to be organ donors, they will need to die in a surgery room in a hospital. Cancer patients typically cannot be organ donors because their organs are compromised, though some ask for euthanasia at an earlier stage in the disease precisely because they wish to be organ donors. There are the usual moral reservations about euthanasia as well as the concern that patients are being pressured by unscrupulous medical providers to volunteer for euthanasia and organ donation. On the other hand, can we deny the terminally ill their last wish for their deaths to gain meaning through a life-affirming gift? In a case of euthanasia combined with organ donation, one might expect a patient to say that she hopes that the transplants will be successful and that her sacrifice of giving up on dying at home or choosing to die earlier rather than later will give a few people a new lease on life.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> There is a discussion of organ donation euthanasia in Dominic Wilkinson and Julian Savulescu, "Should we allow organ donation euthanasia? Alternatives for maximizing the number and quality of organs for transplantation," *Bioethics* 26 (2012): 32–48.

doi: [10.1111/j.1467-8519.2010.01811.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8519.2010.01811.x). Accessed 1 June 2017.

For a discussion of Belgian cases, see D. Ysebaert et al. "Organ Procurement After Euthanasia: Belgian Experience," *Transplantation Proceedings* 41 (2009): 585–586. DOI:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.transproceed.2008.12.025>. Accessed 1 June 2017.

For coverage in the UK press see Simon Caldwell, "Organs of those killed by euthanasia being used," *The Telegraph*, 14 June 2011.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/belgium/8572849/Organs-of-those-killed-by-euthanasia-being-used.html>. Accessed 1 June 2017.

## Hopes about the Attitudes of Others

People care about how others will relate to them after they are gone. There are three types of future attitudes of others that we may hope for. We may hope to be missed, we may hope to be remembered and we may hope to be respected. These hopes are not independent, but they are conceptually distinct. Let us look at each type in turn.

### Hoping to Be Missed

Mark Twain wrote: “Let us endeavor so to live so that when we come to die even the undertaker will be sorry.”<sup>25</sup> Being sorry is one thing, but missing a loved one who has left us can be mental anguish. Dickinson compares two earlier episodes of painful parting in her life with the parting she will face in death and writes “Parting is all we know of heaven – And all we need of hell.”<sup>26</sup> But why would we want to be missed? There is clearly a tension here. As I will discuss in the next section, we also hope that our loved ones will flourish. And if their lives are marred by the mental anguish of loss, then that impedes their flourishing. Rönnegard recognizes this tension:

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On the website of the Dutch Transplantation Foundation, Gert Van Dijk “Orgaandonatie na euthanasie: het kan – maar simpel is het niet,” last updated 5 September 2014, explains the situation in the Netherlands.

<http://www.transplantatiestichting.nl/columns/gert-van-dijk/orgaandonatie-na-euthanasie-het-kan-maar-simpel-het-niet>. Accessed 1 June 2017.

<sup>25</sup> David Graham, *The Philosophy of Mark Twain: The Wit and Wisdom of a Literary Genius* (sine loco: CreateSpace, 2014), 44.

<sup>26</sup> Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1924; Bartleby.com, 2000) Part One: Life XCVI. <http://www.bartleby.com/113/1096.html>. Accessed 1 June 2017.

We want those we love to remember us, and if we are really honest, we want them to be saddened by our absence. How can we want to be the cause of sadness for our loved ones? [New Paragraph] This paradox is only apparent. We all feel this way, but not because we are egotistical self-centred maniacs. We don't want our loved ones to be unhappy *per se*. What we want is for the feeling of love to be mutual, and sadness is the unavoidable consequence of missing someone who has touched our lives deeply. One might say that the proof of the loving is in the dying.<sup>27</sup>

So being missed is a sign that we were loved and we hope to be missed because we hope that we were loved. However, at the same time we do not wish any anguish on our loved ones. There are many ways in which this tension can play out.

Being missed should be more than a *sign* of being loved. If it is just a sign, then there is no need for it if I *know* that I am being loved. The hope to see signs comes with uncertainty about the presence of their cause. If we want fire, then we hope for smoke when we can't see the fire, but if we are confident that there is fire, then why hope for smoke? But even if people are certain that they were loved, they may still hope to be missed. What can we make of this?

There are still two reasons why we might hope to be missed. First, Dan Moller discusses how the deceased are missed because their loved ones *need* them. They are important to them because they are unique and irreplaceable in their relationships with their loved ones.<sup>28</sup> We hope

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<sup>27</sup> David Rönnegard, "The Party without Me," *Philosophy Now*, June-July 2015. [https://philosophynow.org/issues/108/The\\_Party\\_Without\\_Me](https://philosophynow.org/issues/108/The_Party_Without_Me). Accessed 1 June 2017.

<sup>28</sup> Dan Moller, "Love and Death," *The Journal of Philosophy* 104 (2007): 301–16.

that we have this kind of importance to our loved ones and hence we hope to be missed. Second, we may also hope that their love does not suddenly extinguish when we die. We hope that we will continue to be loved in some form or other when we are gone—even if over time it will just be a presence in a small corner of their hearts—and being missed is constitutive of being loved *in absentia*.

But certainly this should be balanced against our concern for the wellbeing of our loved ones. If we hope to be missed by loved ones, we should hope to be missed through a type of grief that is edifying. We should not want to be missed by a hellish grief that mars flourishing in life. We may hope to die in a way that is not traumatic for our loved ones, in a way that they can accept and that allows them to come to terms with their loss.

The hope to be missed can spill over in a shameful hope that feeds our sense of self-importance. A person may *relish* the expectation that she will be sorely missed when she is gone because she wants to think of herself as being entirely irreplaceable. Compare: Suppose you quit your job in protest or are fired from your job and you relish the expectation that things will go haywire in the company and that your boss will wish she had treated you better or had kept you on the payroll. This is not a model for hoping to be missed in death.

One may also be wary of particular types of expressions of loss. John Wayne said: “God—how I hate solemn funerals. When I die, take me into a room and burn me. Then my family and a few good friends should get together, have a few good belts and talk about the crazy old times we all had together.”<sup>29</sup> In line with the public character of John Wayne, one could interpret this quote as follows. John Wayne thinks that there is something phony about

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<sup>29</sup> Carol Lea Mueller, ed. *The Quotable John Wayne: The Grit and Wisdom of an American Icon* (New York: Taylor Trade Publishing, 2007), 18.

expressions of loss that are typical in our culture and he abhors phony emotions. So it is not that he does not want to be missed. Rather he does not want to be missed by people bawling their eyes out in church pews. He distrusts such sentiments, because he does not take them to be genuine.

But we may go one step further. John Wayne might think that a healthy relationship is a relationship that permits us to let go, be it when paths split during our lives or be it in death. A few good stories and laughs are a good means to do precisely that, whereas a relationship that generates a Dickinson-style grief is itself pathological.

Christina Rossetti's poems *Song* and *Crossed Hands and Closed Eyes After Death* invite an even more troubling interpretation. Let us first look at the first stanza of *Song*:

When I am dead, my dearest,  
Sing not sad songs for me;  
Plant thou no roses at my head,  
Nor shady cypress tree:  
Be the green grass above me  
With showers and dewdrops wet;  
if thou wilt, remember  
And if thou wilt, forget.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Christina G. Rossetti, "Song," in: *English Poetry III: From Tennyson to Whitman*. Vol. XLII. The Harvard Classics (New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1909–14; Bartleby.com, 2001) <http://www.bartleby.com/42/723.html>. Accessed 1 June 2017.

We can read these lines as an expression of an ideal of Victorian female self-forgetfulness—do not bother shedding tears at my behalf. But her pen is much sharper in *Crossed Hands and Closed Eyes After Death*<sup>31</sup>, where she gives a voice to a deceased woman commenting on her husband’s tears during the wake:

(...) He leaned above me, thinking that I slept  
And could not hear him; but I heard him say:  
‘Poor child, poor child’: and as he turned away  
Came a deep silence, and I knew he wept.  
He did not touch the shroud, or raise the fold  
That hid my face, or take my hand in his,  
Or ruffle the smooth pillows for my head:  
He did not love me living: but once dead  
He pitied me; and very sweet it is  
To know he still is warm though I am cold.

The two poems together can be interpreted as a distrust of tears for the dead. These tears are often not indicative of a love for the deceased while he or she was alive. They are mixed with

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<sup>31</sup> Christina G. Rossetti, “XVI. Crossed Hands and Closed Eyes After Death,” in: *The Book of Sorrow*, ed. by Andrew Macphail (London, New York: Oxford University Press, 1916; Bartleby.com, 2012) <http://www.bartleby.com/361/215.html>.

pity and many other sentiments that make them suspect as an expression of love. This is a darker explanation of Rossetti's indifference about being remembered than self-forgetfulness.<sup>32</sup>

### Hoping to Be Remembered

Hoping to be remembered is connected to hoping to have made a difference, but it is not quite the same. Alfred Russell Wallace and Charles Darwin came up with the core ideas underlying evolutionary theory at roughly the same time. Now suppose Wallace's work did more for evolutionary theory than Darwin's work, but that it was still the case that Darwin is more remembered than Wallace. Would you prefer to be Wallace or Darwin? People may give different answers to this question depending on whether they hope more strongly to have made a difference or hope more strongly to be remembered.

People do not just hope to be remembered, they hope to be remembered *well*. John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor managed their correspondence and destroyed whole letters and parts of letters because they knew that scholars would go through them with a fine comb.<sup>33</sup> Would we rather be forgotten than be remembered poorly? The Oscar Wilde quote comes to mind: "... there is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about."<sup>34</sup> Something like this also holds for being remembered. But presumably there are limits

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<sup>32</sup> For an interesting discussion by George P. Landow, "The Dead Woman Talks Back: Christina Rossetti's Ironic Intonation of the Dead Fair Maiden," last updated 23 October 2002 at <http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/crossetti/gpl1.html>.

<sup>33</sup> Harriet Taylor Mill, *The Complete Works of Harriet Taylor Mill*, ed. by Jo Ellen Jacobs and Paula Harms Payne (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1998), 322.

<sup>34</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891 [1890]), Ch. 1. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/174/174-h/174-h.htm>.

to this. People typically would rather be forgotten than (truly or falsely) remembered as a villain. But they might prefer the mix of some good and some bad to complete oblivion.

But why do we hope to be remembered? I can see three answers. First, we hope to be remembered well because we take being well thought of as a *sui generis* good. My posthumous reputation as such matters to me, as does my reputation during my lifetime. Second, we hope to be remembered as a special case of hoping for a worthwhile life. We can make sense of this on evidential grounds. We may hope to be remembered because it is a sign of having done things that are memorable and hence of having made a difference. We care about having made a difference because we care about our lives having been worthwhile. Third, we can also make sense of hoping to be remembered if we believe that a worthwhile life leaves a trace. In this case the trace is a trace in the minds and hearts of other people. Woody Allen makes light of this desire: “I do not want to achieve immortality through my work, I want to achieve immortality by not dying. I don’t want to live on in the hearts of my countrymen, I want to live on in my apartment.”<sup>35</sup> Even if the joke belies this, for some people there is a semblance of immortality gained by continuing to live in the memory of future people.

### Hoping to Be Respected

Let us start with two stories that are in the philosophical lore—one about Diogenes and one about Jeremy Bentham. Cicero reports:

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<sup>35</sup> Woody Allen and Linda Sunshine, ed., *The Illustrated Woody Allen Reader* (New York: Knopf, 1993)

Diogenes (...) ordered that he should be cast away without burial. Then his friends objected to him: “Like fodder for birds and beasts?” “No, in no way,” he responded. “Rather, place a little stick next to me, so that I may frighten them off.” They said, “How could you? For you will not be conscious.” And he concluded: “Therefore, how will being shredded by beasts harm me, if I will not be conscious?”<sup>36</sup>

Jeremy Bentham’s body was embalmed and put on display in UCL, in accordance with his own wishes. King’s College London students stole the head in 1975 and there is a legend that it was used for an impromptu game of football.<sup>37</sup>

Most people prefer that their corpses will not be fodder for wild animals and would rather not see their heads used as footballs. We are horrified when we hear reports of the corpses of US soldiers that were dragged through town in Mogadishu, the severed heads being displayed by ISIS, neo-Nazis desecrating Jewish graveyards with swastikas, etc.

Furthermore, we hope that the things that we have created will be treated with the respect that is due to them. We don’t use the books that a deceased loved one wrote as door stops. We wouldn’t appreciate that a hymn we composed would come to be used in a commercial for a cleaning product. If we love classical music, we may abhor how Electric Light Orchestra’s

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<sup>36</sup> Cicero, *Tusculanae Disputationes* 1.43.104. Quoted and translated in the blog *Tradicón Clásica* by Gabriel Laguna, “The Expression “Après moi le déluge”, and Its Classical Antecedents,” last updated 13 January 2006.

<http://tradicionclasica.blogspot.com/2006/01/expression-aprs-moi-le-dluge-and-its.html>.

<sup>37</sup> “UCL Bentham Project. Who was Jeremy Bentham? Auto-Icon,”

<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/Bentham-Project/who/autoicon>.

makes light of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony in their version of "Roll over Beethoven".<sup>38</sup> And even a transfer of elements of a song between radically different musical genres and messages may strike the original creator as disconcerting. For example, follow the progression of the hymn "Come as You Are" written by the Loreto Sister Deirdre Browne through the songs by the same name by Nirvana and Patti LaBelle.<sup>39</sup>

We hope that our bodies, our grave sites, and our creations will be treated with respect. And when we see instances in which others are not paid such respect, our stomachs turn and we may think to ourselves, I sure hope that something like that won't happen to me after I am dead and gone!

This brings us to a tension in the ethics of photojournalism. In the previous section, I discussed how one might hope that one's death will lead to some good. Now think of Alan Kurdi, the toddler fleeing from Syria whose corpse was washed ashore on 2 September 2015 in Turkey. Some newspapers pictured his lifeless body washed ashore with his face half exposed to the camera. Others found the picture disrespectful and published a picture where a rescue worker carries away the body with only the boy's legs in view. The fact of the matter is that this very picture was very much a turning point for world opinion.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Electric Light Orchestra, "Roll over Beethoven"  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CxXl4oS9wss>.

<sup>39</sup> The hymn was composed by Deirdre Browne around 1978 (Personal communication.) It was published in Paul Gurr, *Come as You Are* (Richmond, Victoria: Spectrum Publication, 1986). (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b0cbQS55RTM>) A song by the same name was released by Nirvana in 1992. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vabnZ9-ex7o>) Note the similarity in the opening lines: "Come as you are ... As I want you to be" in Nirvana and "Come as you are. That's how I want you" in Browne. Arguably, there is a slight melodic similarity between the original hymn and Patti LaBelle's "Come as You Are" released in 1994. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tSpp9SgmVH4>)

<sup>40</sup> Joel Gunter, "Alan Kurdi: Why one picture cut through," in *BBC News* (4 September 2015) <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34150419>.

A newspaper's editorial team is caught between two poles. On the one hand, they owe it to the families of the victims and also to the families of the victims that corpses be treated with respect and not be captured into sensational pictures making newspaper sales jump. Yet, on the other hand, we could also presume that the victim would not object to his death being instrumental in bringing about a better world, by his own light, and a better world by a refugee's own light is a world that is more receptive to the plight of refugees. One way of paying respect to the deceased is by making their hopes and dreams come true. A newspaper can do this by giving publicity to their suffering and graphic depictions may often be more instrumental. The situation with Alan Kurdi is more complicated because he was just a toddler and had no understanding of the political context. But in general, to know what a person's stronger desires and sensitivities would have been often requires guesswork or intimate knowledge of the deceased, which we typically do not have in the context of photojournalism.<sup>41</sup>

### Hopes about the Future

There is a Greek anonymous fragment from a lost tragedy quoting the lines: "When I die, let earth and fire mix; It matters not to me, for my affairs will be unaffected." We find this line echoed in Lucretius, a follower of Epicurus, writing in *On the Nature of Things (De Rerum Natura)*: "Certainly then, when we do not exist, nothing at all will be able to affect us nor excite our senses, not even if the earth mixes with the sea, and the sea with the heavens." Seneca quotes the Greek fragment in indirect speech. He writes that the verse "urges (*iubet*) that after [one's]

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<sup>41</sup> Luc Bovens, "Moral Luck, Photojournalism and Pornography," *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 32 (1998): 205-217.

death, the earth be mixed with the fires.” He finds this attitude despicable and puts it on the same level as Nero’s “Let them hate me, as long as they fear me”. In more recent history, we find a similar attitude in Louis XV saying ‘*Après moi, le déluge*’ (‘After me, the downfall’) which he proclaimed a few decades before the French Revolution, which led to the execution of his grandson Louis XVI, who was heir to the throne.<sup>42</sup>

Consider the line “It matters not to me, for my affairs will be unaffected.” Now certainly someone might agree that their affairs will be unaffected, yet the future still matters to them and they have (non-self-affecting) hopes for the future. What is more interesting though is whether it is true that future events do not affect us in any way. These historical fragments are intriguing because they invite different interpretations of how we may or may not hold self-affecting hopes for the future.

First, we might say, with Lucretius, that posthumous calamities do not affect us in that they *do not make a difference to the goodness of our lives*. Second, Seneca and Louis XV can be read to be asking whether posthumous calamities do not affect us in the sense that *an attitude of indifference* towards them is warranted, with Louis XV endorsing such an attitude and Seneca despising it. And third, we may read the optative (“Let ...”) in the Greek fragment or the verb ‘... urges ...’ in Seneca’s rendering of the fragment as expressing a wish for posthumous calamities. Hence they affect us in so far as *we have reason to wish for them*. Let us take up each interpretation in turn.

First, is it the case that posthumous events do not make a difference to the goodness of our lives? In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle discusses whether events after one’s death could

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<sup>42</sup> Quoted and translated in the blog *Tradición Clásica* by Gabriel Laguna, “The Expression ‘Après moi le déluge’, and Its Classical Antecedents” Last updated 13 January 2006. <http://tradicionclasica.blogspot.com/2006/01/expression-aprs-moi-le-dluge-and-its.html>.

affect the happiness of one's life. He concludes that the good and bad fortunes of one's descendants and friends after one's death have some effect on the happiness of one's life, but the effect is weaker than if these events happen during one's lifetime. They may have some effect, but they cannot turn happy lives into unhappy lives or vice versa.<sup>43</sup>

We can easily reconcile Lucretius' and Aristotle's claims. Lucretius is right that what happens after my death may not be able to affect me *then* because it cannot "excite my senses". But with Aristotle, what happens *then* may be able to (non-causally) affect the goodness of my life *now*.

Consider the following analogy. Suppose that I take on the task of running a company and I befriend its employees. My tenure as CEO runs out at the end of the year and I decide to leave for an island in the Pacific with no intention to keep contact or ever return. The future fortunes of the company and my friends after my departure will not "excite my senses" since I will never know about them. But how the company will do affects the goodness of my tenure as CEO. Whether the company's stocks will dive the day after I take off affects how well I am doing as a CEO *now*. If I have invested in my friends, then it matters to me now that they do not join the mafia the day after I leave or that misfortune awaits them. On grounds of my caring for them, their present and future lives matter to me even though I will never find out what the future has in store for them.

Hence, events after my departure as CEO can affect the goodness of my tenure as CEO. Similarly, events after my departure from this world can affect the goodness of my life. And it is on such self-affecting grounds that I may have hopes for the future. People do indeed care about

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<sup>43</sup> Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics*. W.D. Ross, trans., Internet Classics Archive. Bk I, sections 10-11. <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachaen.1.i.html>.

the wellbeing of descendants, loved ones and projects that they have invested in. And these are not just hopes for a better world, but they are hopes for things that affect them.

Second, is an attitude of indifference towards posthumous calamities warranted? With Seneca, we might think that minimally decent people are not indifferent to the wellbeing of future people, just as they are not indifferent to the wellbeing of distant people. Such concerns may be expressed in hopes for the wellbeing of distant and future people. This is particularly relevant today in the face of the resistance to making any sacrifices to mitigate climate change for future generations. Once we heed this call to care not just for our near and dear but also for future people, these hopes become self-affecting because they are reflective of our own concerns.

Third, the Greek fragment and Seneca's rendering of it border on a wish for posthumous calamities rather than just an expression of mere indifference. In this case there is a different kind of self-affecting hope at work here. Suppose that I have to leave a party early. I may console myself by saying that the party is really winding down. This may be mere wishful thinking. But it can also spill over in a kind of petty and shameful hope. I just can't stand the idea that the DJ will pick up the pace and that I will be missing out. So I may hope that such great things won't happen because I won't be there to enjoy them. What I hope to hear from my friends tomorrow is that the party venue closed down a few minutes after I had left.

As they grow old some people selectively focus their attention on unwelcome developments in society and the world at large. They even become enamored by religious or secular doomsday scenarios. It is easier to go if the future is not worth living for or if we all have to go together anyway. This may be just a way to find consolation, but there is a fine line between consolation through selective focus and wishful thinking on the one hand and petty and shameful hopes on the other.

## Summary

I started with the question: Considering my analysis of hope, why might one not hope for eternal life? The standard line is that people refrain from such hope because they believe eternal life to be impossible, but one may also refrain because one lacks a desire for eternal life or does not see it as a proper object of mental engagement. I then turned to four broad types of secular hopes at the end of life.

*Hopes about one's life.* There is a difference between hoping that one *has lived up to certain ideals* versus hoping that one *has made a mark*, which maps onto Aristotle's distinction between atelic and telic activities. *Small* marks may be as worthwhile as *grand* marks and *ephemeral* marks may be as worthwhile as *enduring* marks. Having lived up to certain ideals and having made ephemeral marks do not require the existence of future generations to find value in one's life.

*Hopes about one's death.* People hope *to die well*, that is, in a way that is expressive of the ideals that they stood for in their lifetimes, and they hope that their deaths *will not be in vain*. These hopes are relevant to the policy question of whether legislatures that permit euthanasia should also permit its combination with organ donation.

*Hopes about attitudes of others.* I distinguished between the hope *to be missed*, the hope *to be remembered*, and the hope *to be respected*. There is something paradoxical about the hope to be missed—on the one hand we hope to be missed, but on the other hand we want loved ones to flourish and not to be marred by grief. The hope to be remembered connects to the hope to have made an enduring mark. In editorial decisions about publishing pictures of the dead in the

media, there is a tension between meeting the hope that one be respected and the hope not to die in vain.

*Hopes about the future.* The phrase ‘*Après moi, le déluge*’ and its predecessors in the ancient literature are open to multiple interpretations. First, we may interpret it to say that posthumous calamities do not affect us in that they *do not make a difference to the goodness of our lives*. Second, we may interpret it to say that they do not affect us in the sense that *an attitude of indifference towards them is warranted*. And finally, the phrase can be an expression of a *shameful hope* that things will deteriorate after one’s deaths so that one does not miss out on anything.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> In writing this article I was inspired by David Rönnegard’s moving pieces “An Atheist in a Foxhole” and “The Party without Me” and subsequent e-mail exchanges with him—many thanks to David for getting me to think about these issues. I am also grateful for comments and discussion with Anna Bartsch, Susanne Burri, Christina Easton, Elinor Mason, Alex Voorhoeve, and Monique Wonderly. My research was supported by the Center for Human Values in Princeton University and the Hope and Optimism Initiative in Cornell University and Notre Dame University supported by a grant from the John Templeton Foundation.

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