

# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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*Philosophy is Everybody's Business*

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*Lucretius states we do not regret the time before we were born because we cannot remember it. Existence before life is the mirror image of existence after life. Finally, death is inevitable and therefore it is irrational to fear it.*



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## DEATH AND ITS CONCEPT

*Jeff Mason argues that the concept of death has no subjective meaning.*

Philosophers and non-philosophers stand on a level of equality with respect to death. There are no experts on death, for there is nothing to know about it. Not even those who study the death process have an edge on the rest of us. We are all equals in thinking about death, and we all begin and end thinking about it from a position of ignorance.

Death and its concept are absolutely empty. No picture comes to mind. The concept of death has a use for the living, while death itself has no use for anything. All we can say about death is that it is either real or it is not real. If it is real, then the end of one's life is a simple termination. If it is not real, then the end of one's embodied life is not true death, but a portal to another life.

Having no content, we must speak of death metaphorically. For

those who think death is real, death is a blank wall. For those who think it is not real, death is a door to another life. Whether we think of death as a wall or a door, we cannot avoid using one metaphor or another. We often say that a person who dies is relieved of suffering. However, if death is real, then it is metaphorical even to say that the dead do not suffer, as though something of them remains not to suffer. As there are already many speculations about some sort of 'next life,' I will focus on the view that death is real and marks the final end of an individual's life.

Let us explore the metaphor that death is a wall a bit further. Each of us is born facing this wall. From that moment on, every step we take is towards it, no matter which way we turn. There is simply no other direction to take. Like a fun house mirror, the wall of death show us our living fears and distorted images of ourselves. All we see when we look at death is a reflection of our own lives.


Death has no subjective meaning at all. It will come to other people, but never to me. Of course, I know that I am going to die. Death means the end of my future. However, as long as I am alive, I will be living toward that future possibility of no longer having possibilities.

The unavoidable conclusion is that, if death is real, neither I nor you will ever personally taste death. I will cease to be conscious before the end. No matter how close I come to it, death recedes before me. I am actually dead only for others. When the end actually arrives, my dead body passes into the hands of the coroner. I will no longer be there. Death is always described from the perspective of the living. As Ludwig Wittgenstein famously put it, "Death is not an experience in life."

The concept of death is unlike most other concepts. Usually we have an object and the concept of that object. For example, we have a horse and the concept of a horse. However, the concept of death is absolutely without any object whatsoever. Thinking about the prospect of one's own death is a constant meditation upon our own ignorance. There is no method for getting to know death better, because death cannot be known at all.

One trouble with discussing this topic is the instinctive fear of death. We tend to avoid death in our thoughts and actions. However, if we could forget our fears for a minute, we could see more clearly how interesting the concept actually is from a more detached point of view.

Birth and death are the bookends of our lives. Living towards death in time gives one's life a direction and framework within which to understand the changes that life brings. The world looks very differently to the young and the old. The young look forward. The old look back. What matters to us changes as we get older. The prospect of death informs these changes. The young have an intellectual understanding that death comes to us all, but their mortality has not become real to them. For the old, mortality starts to sink in.

For a long time, I have been puzzled by two famous philosophical ideas about death, one from Plato and one from Spinoza. The first is that a philosopher has a vital concern with death and constantly meditates upon it. The second is that the wise person thinks of nothing so little as death. Perhaps the truth is somewhere in the middle. Ignoring death leaves us with a false sense of life's permanence and perhaps encourages us to lose ourselves in the minutiae of daily life. Obsessive rumination on death, on the other hand, can lead us away from life. Honestly coming to terms with one's death involves reflection on its significance in one's life, and thinking about the larger values that give life its meaning. In the end, it is useful to think about death only to the point that it frees us to live fully immersed in the life we have yet to live. 

**Jeff Mason** was a lecturer in philosophy at Middlesex University. He wrote this piece in 2011 six months before a diagnosis of terminal lung cancer.

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## PLATO'S SOCRATES ON DEATH


(from *Apology*)

Let us reflect in another way, and we shall see that there is great reason to hope that death is a good, for one of two things: - either death is a state of nothingness and utter unconsciousness, or, as men say, there is a change and migration of the soul from this world to another. Now if you suppose that there is no consciousness, but a sleep like the sleep of him who is undisturbed even by the sight of dreams, death will be an unspeakable gain. For if a person were to select the night in which his sleep was undisturbed even by dreams, and were to compare with this the other days and nights of his life, and then were to tell us how many days and nights he had passed in the course of his life better and more pleasantly than this one, I think that any man, I will not say a private man, but even the great king, will not find many such days or nights, when compared with the others. Now if death is like this, I say that to die is gain; for eternity is then only a single night. But if death is the journey to another place, and there, as men say, all the

dead are, what good, O my friends and judges, can be greater than this? If indeed when the pilgrim arrives in the world below, he is delivered from the professors of justice in this world, and finds the true judges who are said to give judgment there, Minos and Rhadamanthus and Aeacus and Triptolemus, and other sons of God who were righteous in their own life, that pilgrimage will be worth making. What would not a man give if he might converse with Orpheus and Musaeus and Hesiod and Homer? Nay, if this be true, let me die again and again. I, too, shall have a wonderful interest in a place where I can converse with Palamedes, and Ajax the son of Telamon, and other heroes of old, who have suffered death through an unjust judgment; and there will be no small pleasure, as I think, in comparing my own sufferings with theirs. Above all, I shall be able to continue my search into true and false knowledge; as in this world, so also in that; I shall find out who is wise, and who pretends to be wise, and is not. What would not a man give, O judges, to be able to examine the leader of the great Trojan expedition; or Odysseus or Sisyphus, or numberless others, men and women too! What infinite delight would there be in conversing with them and asking them questions! For in that world they do not put a man to death for this; certainly not. For besides being happier in that world than in this, they will be immortal, if what is said is true.

Wherefore, O judges, be of good cheer about death, and know this of a truth - that no evil can happen to a good man, either in life or after death. He and his are not neglected by the gods; nor has my own approaching end happened by mere chance. But I see clearly that to die and be released was better for me; and therefore the oracle gave no sign. For which reason also, I am not angry with my accusers, or my condemners; they have done me no harm, although neither of them meant to do me any good; and for this I may gently blame them.

Still I have a favor to ask of them. When my sons are grown up, I would ask you, O my friends, to punish them; and I would have you trouble them, as I have troubled you, if they seem to care about riches, or anything, more than about virtue; or if they pretend to be something when they are really nothing, - then reprove them, as I have reprov'd you, for not caring about that for which they ought to care, and thinking that they are something when they are really nothing. And if you do this, I and my sons will have received justice at your hands.

The hour of departure has arrived, and we go our ways - I to die, and you to live. Which is better God only knows. 

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