# TEACHING METAPHYSICS – DEATH AS A WAY INTO METAPHYSICS

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We can teach some classical metaphysical themes indirectly, through a field in which different metaphysical themes intersect. In that way, something that can be too abstract for young minds, if we put it in some context, can be very concrete and open for understanding and investigation. In this article, I will try to show what starting point for metaphysics is the death; how commonsense questions transfer into metaphysical questions; and how metaphysical theories determine our pre-philosophical attitudes. I will take three metaphysical fields – personal identity, nature of harm, and philosophy of time – and show how students deal with them through the discussion of the value of death for the person who dies. The main point is that students should see, and they actually do see, that there is no way to avoid hard metaphysical questions if they want to think of things which, at first sight, can seem clear, undoubtful, and commonsensical – but they are not.

https://doi.org/

ISBN 978-961-299-082-4

Keywords:
death,
nature of harm,
metaphysics of time,
personal identity,
teaching metaphysics



DOI https://doi.org/ 10.18690/um.ff.11.2025.11

ISBN 978-961-299-082-4

Ključne besede: smrt, narava škodovanja, metafizika časa, osebna identiteta, poučevanje metafizike

# POUČEVANJE METAFIZIKE – SMRT KOT POT V METAFIZIKO

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Nekatere klasične metafizične teme lahko poučujemo posredno, tj. na področju, kjer se različne metafizične teme prepletajo. Na ta način lahko nekaj, kar je za mlade ume preveč abstraktno, postane zelo konkretno in odprto za razumevanje in raziskovanje, če ga postavimo v določen kontekst. V tem članku bom poskušal pokazati, kako je smrt izhodišče za metafiziko; kako se vprašanja zdrave pameti preoblikujejo v metafizična vprašanja in kako metafizične teorije določajo naša pred-filozofska stališča. Obravnaval bom tri metafizična področja – osebno identiteto, naravo škode in filozofijo časa – ter pokazal, kako se študenti soočajo z njimi skozi razpravo o vrednosti smrti za osebo, ki umre. Glavna točka je, da bi morali študenti videti, in dejansko vidijo, da se ni mogoče izogniti težkim metafizičnim vprašanjem, če želijo razmišljati o stvareh, ki se na prvi pogled zdijo jasne, nedvomne in zdravorazumske – a niso.



## 1 Introduction

At the beginning of the study of philosophy, students are in some kind of switch from an empirically concrete to a philosophically abstract way of thinking. They need some time to accustom themselves to the metaphysical way of thinking. At the same time, it is necessary to produce interest in metaphysics and show that without metaphysical thinking we do not have a complete understanding of reality or elements of reality. If metaphysics investigates and discovers the fundamental structure of reality, that which is beyond appearances, then it is possible that our common-sense, or scientific, understanding of reality is in discrepancy with metaphysical theories. This fact, that fundamental reality can be different from our common sense understanding of the world, and that our value judgments, in the end, are not justified in the fundamental reality, is something that students need to see from the beginning of philosophical studies. And the question is: what is the best way to start teaching metaphysics according to the above goals?

Generally speaking, I think that we should start with some concrete problems and then ascend to the more complex and abstract metaphysical theories. One example of this strategy is teaching metaphysics through the philosophy of death. Death is a way to metaphysics or a good starting point for some metaphysical fields and theories. Why?

First of all, death is a concrete problem, and every reflective person thinks of death in some part of their life. Death is a common subject, subject of arts, subject of sciences, and subject of our daily life. Even contemporary technological society with its obsessive focus on health, prolongation of life, quantity over quality of life, cannot erase our deepest human concern about death. Death, aside from some transhumanistic theories, is a structural characteristic of every man and humanity, and of every living creature. So, from the aspect of motivation, philosophy of death is a very grateful field, because the fact of death is the fact of every man. And students want to know how to think of that fact and how to deal with that fact, even if they live in a society which marginalises death.

Second, contemporary analytic philosophy of death is mostly a metaphysical field. So, from the aspect of content, philosophy of death is an intersection of various metaphysical fields and theories. In the first place, I think of the philosophy of time, theories of personal identity and the nature of harm. Questions about the nature of

time, identity of things through time, nature of harm for beings, are difficult metaphysical questions, and instead of teaching every one of that field separately we can do philosophy of death. Later, when students develop basic knowledge and interests for these themes, they can do some of these fields in a more specific manner. So, my aim in this article is to show how students are involved in metaphysics through the philosophy of death and how they ascend to the more complex and abstract metaphysical theories, which are not in their focus at the very beginning.

# 2 Death and Philosophy of Time

When students are for the first time confronted with the question "Who is the subject of harm of death if death is irreversible annihilation of the subject?" they are confronted with the challenge. If there is no postmortal subject of harm of death, then death is not a harm for the person who dies, say some Epicurean philosophers (Suits, 2012). This is a hard conclusion to swallow, especially if students come from a culture and religion in which death is categorised as the greatest of all evils. Something must be wrong, either with the Epicurean argument or with a commonsensical culturally entrenched attitude about death. If the existence of the postmortal subject is a necessary condition to establish a foundation of harm of death for the person who dies, then we need the subject back in our account. In other words, if we want to justify a claim that death is bad for the person who dies, then we should avoid the possibility of a non-subject harm account. After this point, students mostly divide into two groups. The minority says, "Yes, Epicurus is right, there is no subject of death, death is not bad for the person who dies" and they remain Epicurean, in this sense, to the end of the course. Others are confused, and they do not want to abandon the pre-reflective attitude that death is a harm for the person who dies.1 So, if we need death's harm, we need the subject back, and consequently we need some metaphysics of time in our account. On the one hand, students with non-Epicurean intuitions are in a position to search for some metaphysics of time which can overcome the non-subject problem, while students with Epicurean intuitions are satisfied with the non-subject argument, 2 but they must

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> These data are derived from 6 years of "Death" course at the Department of Philosophy, University of Rijeka. Approximate number of students is 30 in every year, and each year students divide into Epicureanists and non-Epicureanists in a similar proportion (approximately 1/3 for Epicureanism, and 2/3 for non-Epicureanism).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> The argument goes: "If there is no post-mortal subject of death, there is no harm of death for that subject. When a person dies, he ceases to exist. Therefore, harm of death cannot be harm for someone who dies."

be aware that they are already included in some metaphysics of time. That metaphysics is, of course, presentism.

Presentism is the view that what exists is present time and its content. Whatever exists, it is in the present, whatever is not in the present, does not exist simpliciter. The comprehension that their implicit view about time is part of one particular metaphysical theory of time is a big step toward philosophical thinking of time. Presentism is very close to our commonsensical understanding of time, but as philosophical theory is confronted with serious problems. For example, there is a problem of singular or Russellian propositions. Singular propositions are propositions about a particular individual. That very individual is a direct constituent of propositions, and the problem will emerge when we have a singular proposition whose constituent is a non-present object, as is Socrates, for example. If a nonpresent object does not exist, then a singular proposition about that object also does not exist. If Socrates does not exist, then every proposition which is constituted of Socrates does not say anything about Socrates. Not just that, if non-present objects do not exist, then we cannot stand in some relation to those objects. We cannot feel admiration for Socrates. However, the problem seems to arise with propositions about non-existent Socrates, e.g., something about Socrates. It seems that the proposition "Socrates was wise and brave" says something about non-existent Socrates and that we can feel admiration for Socrates. So, in the core of presentism is the claim that there is no time except present time, past and future are not real, and there are no propositions about past and future time. But the problem is, we make propositions about past and future times all the time. And these propositions make sense to us, they are not meaningless and empty. These are serious problems for presentism, and there are some good philosophical answers to the listed problems.<sup>3</sup> What is important here is that students should be able to see that nonsubject argument in death discussion is as good as presentism is good. If we want to defend Epicureanism in the death discussion on the grounds of the non-existent subject, we also should defend some specific metaphysical theory of time, namely presentism. No presentism, no Epicureanism.

On the other hand, as I said above, students with non-Epicurean intuition are in the position to search for some alternative philosophy of time. Philosophy of time which is compatible with the position that death is a harm for the person who dies and

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> For explication of problems and defence of presentism see Markosian (2004).

philosophy of time which can resolve the non-subject problem. That philosophy of time is eternalism. Eternalism is the view that past, present, and future time and its content equally exist. The only difference is that past and future things are not now, but in a strict ontological sense, they exist simpliciter. Time is nothing else but another dimension in the space-time continuum. An analogy with space is illustrative here. Just as the planet Jupiter exists, but is not here, equally exist past and future objects, but they are not now. If something is not now, this does not mean that that thing does not exist. It exists, but it is not now. It is obvious that eternalism can solve the non-subject problem in death discussion.<sup>4</sup> Dead people have not disappeared from reality at once, they just disappeared from the present. Socrates is not now, but he exists in an eternalist metaphysical framework. So, we have the subject of death's harm again. We have a referent, there is no problem with singular propositions and their constituents. They are real. At this point, students' reactions are ambiguous. Those on the Epicurean side become more confident that they should defend presentism, because eternalism is far away from some common-sense conceptions of time. It seems that thinking about real past, present, and future objects equally requires some significant effort to change and reconstruct basic beliefs. And some students are not willing to do that. Those on the non-Epicurean side are divided into two groups. The first group has an attitude of acceptance. Death is a harm for the person who dies, and if that claim is defensible only in the eternalist philosophy of time, then it is necessary to defend eternalism. The second group also claims that death is a harm for the person who dies, but they do not want eternalist metaphysics on the same ground as Epicureans - it is too far away from their intuitive commonsensical conception of time. Eternalism brings too much metaphysical baggage. Baggage which is too heavy to bring. They want something else, something simpler; they want both death as harmful and presentism. But this combination requires some further metaphysics. For example, modalism ontology in the framework of presentism. In that ontology, there is a difference between "there are," and "exist," between "being an object" and "being an existing object." These two ontological categories give reality not just to existing objects, which exist in the present, but to non-existent objects which are merely possible. According to this modalism metaphysics, possible objects are equally real, and they can have properties of "being existent" or "being non-existent." The point, in this context, is that nonexistent people are real people and we can refer to those people, we can talk about

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> For explication, defence of eternalism and death badness see Silverstein (2010).

them, and we can, justifiably, say that death is a harm for dead people.<sup>5</sup> If eternalist ontology is hard to swallow, this modalism ontology is even harder. But there is no easy way. And this is the point where students are confronted with different metaphysical intersections. They start with some intuitions about the harm of death, and after some time they need to choose which metaphysical way to follow in order to defend their intuitions. If they want to preserve the common-sense intuition that death is bad for the person who dies, they need to follow eternalism or modalism ontology in the framework of presentism. If they want to defend Epicureanism, they need to defend presentism. So, something which at the beginning seems so concrete and clear – a claim about death being bad for the person who dies – after some time becomes a deep metaphysical question. There are no easy answers in philosophy.

# 3 Death and Personal Identity

The second metaphysical field which emerges in the discussion of death is personal identity. Before I start with personal identity, it is important to notice that many students come with culturally and religiously determined attitudes about what we are or what kind of beings we are. The first task is to explicate their basic ontological framework and possible internal inconsistency in their set of beliefs. The problem of death for humans is, first of all, the problem of our future non-existence, it is the problem of ceasing to be. It is not the problem of logically possible ways of some form of existence after biological death. Contemporary analytic philosophy of death presupposes that biological death is the end of our conscious life, complete annihilation of being. Even if that is not true, from a philosophical point of view, we are primarily concerned with non-existence, not with possible existence in some other forms after the event of death. The first problem in teaching philosophy of death, then, will occur when students have some idealist or substance dualism conception of a person, implicit or explicit, and at the same time they need to think about the value of complete annihilation of a person. Discussion about the value of death for the person who dies cannot start if students say, "Yes, but what if there is some form of life after death...," which is a very common attitude at the beginning of the course of death. At this point, it is necessary to go back to ontological foundations. It is important that students recognise that their non-reflective attitudes are already formed in some ontological framework. If they start from the position of substance dualism or from the position of platonic idealism, the question about

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> For defence of such modalism ontology within presentism see Yourgrau (1987).

the value of death for the person who dies takes on a completely different meaning. Then the question is not about annihilation and non-existence but about some forms of existence after biological death. The most important thing then is to form the question in the materialistic ontological framework. Only after the students form the question about the value of death for the person who dies in a materialistic ontological framework, it is possible to start a philosophical discussion of the value of annihilation and non-existence. It takes some time to accommodate students to think in particular ontological frameworks, if they inherited a dualistic picture in their minds, in the purpose of philosophical discussion of the value of annihilation for a person who dies.

When this materialistic position is taken, at least as a presupposition for the philosophical discussion, the question that arises is "When exactly do we cease to exist?" Of course, most students will say "at the moment of death." But, this is just one possible answer and it depends on the view of personal identity. What are we essentially and which are our persistence conditions through time are the questions which determine when we exactly cease to exist. So, an introduction of a metaphysical discussion of personal identity is necessary in order to establish a connection between death and non-existence. It is possible that we cease to exist before biological death occurs; it is also possible that we still exist after biological death occurs. These combinations, in a materialistic framework, can be very puzzling for students at the beginning, and it is necessary to immerse into the metaphysical theory of personal identity in order to illuminate the connection between death and non-existence. These metaphysical theories of personal identity are primarily personism and animalism.

When students meet personism for the first time – the theory of personal identity which claims that we are essentially psychological beings just implemented on the physical structure of our brains – they react positively. That is, they are ready to accept the consequence of personism, that our psychological content (primarily, memory and self-awareness) can be eradicated before the biological death of organisms. And if we essentially are that psychological content, then annihilation of that content is the end of our existence, before or at the moment of the biological

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> It can be formed in dualism if "person" is defined as an inseparable unity of body and soul, and the destruction of body would mean ceasing to exist even if the soul is indestructible, like in the doctrine of Thomas Aquinas. To be myself again I need my body, and that is possible only with the resurrection of the material body which reunites with soul again, said Aquinas. See Donnelly (1994).

death of an organism. According to personism, a disease or accident which can cause the destruction of our psychological structure or cause irreversible coma, much before the death of organisms, would mean that we cease to exist. That consequence, as I said, is perfectly acceptable for most students. However, what they are not ready to accept so willingly is another consequence of personism. That consequence refers to our beginning. The question is, if personism is true, when do we begin to exist? According to presentism, we begin to exist at some indeterminate moment, better to say, at some vague period of time when psychological features begin to develop up to a time where they are fully developed. It is some kind of stepped personality. And first signs of psychological personality are definitely not present when "we" are foetuses, or when "we" are born. This means that we never were foetuses and that we, as psychological persons, were not born at the moment of birth. This consequence is hard to swallow. The comprehension that according to personism I was never a foetus or that "my" birthdate is not the time of the beginning of my existence is not something that students easily integrate into their system of beliefs.<sup>7</sup> So, that undesirable consequence opens the doors to another theory of personal identity through time - to animalism. According to animalism, we are human animals whose identity through time is preserved so long as we remain the same human animal, no matter the psychological structure of that animal. Psychological properties are non-essential, contingent properties of animals, and those properties do not constitute our identity through time. Animalism can give students what they think is a necessary ingredient in the theory of personal identity; namely, that "we" were born at the moment of birth, and that consequently we were a foetus at some time of our existence. But, animalism has weird consequences at the end of our lives. First, it is very counterintuitive that we exist even if our psychological structure is completely and irreversibly destroyed and the brain stem maintains our physiological function of the body. Second, it is not at all clear that we essentially are living human animals. One version of animalism is that we are material objects and identity is preserved through time until that same material object is preserved in more or less the same form. This means not just that we were foetuses, but that we will be a dead corpse if our body remains in more or less the same form as it is now. If we die from a heart attack then, we continue our existence as dead bodies; if we die from a nuclear blast, then we immediately cease to exist.8 At this point of philosophical discussion students prone to animalism divide. One large group will say, "We cease to exist at

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> For defence of personism see Parfit (1984).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> For defence of animalism see Olson (1997). For defence of "non-living animalism" see Feldman (2000).

the moment of death," but then they need to explain the relation between the living body and the dead material object, because identity cannot be a relation between these entities. For example, how to answer the question, "If a dead fish is not a fish but some other object, what then do we eat when we say that we eat fresh fish?" What is the referent of the expression "dead fish," fish or something else that is not a fish but is only very similar to fish? Another, smaller animalistic group of students, will accept that we can persist through time as dead bodies, but then the border between existence and non-existence is maximally blurred. Where is the point, or some relatively precise time, when we can say, "Now, that person ceased to exist"? Therefore, students are confronted with various metaphysical theories of personal identities and their undesirable consequences. As in the case of metaphysics of time, whatever way they choose to argue, there are no easy answers. Whatever intuition they have about the relation of death and non-existence, they are forced to defend some theory of personal identity, and accordingly, every implication of that theory, which can be opposite to their intuitions. Again, there is no easy way to follow.

## 4 Death and Nature of Harm

When students hear, for the first time, Epicurus' argument that death is not bad for the person who dies – not just because there is no subject to whom we can refer, but also because there is no possibility of experiencing any negative feeling after the event of death - some of them say, "Yes, that is exactly what I think, Epicurus is right." What those students share with Epicurus is the presupposition that something can be a harm for the person iff the person can, at least in principle, experience something as a harm. If there is no possibility of negative experience, then there is no possibility of harm for the person in question. This condition, known as the experience condition, is the core of the view that death is not bad for the person who dies. Death is such a state where no experience is possible and cannot be a harm, according to Epicureanism. Those students who do not share enthusiasm for Epicurus' attitude are in a position to defend another conception of harm. The conception of harm that is not tied only to experience. They should defend a nonexperiential conception of harm (and benefit). The conception of harm that arises from a particular theory of well-being, namely, preferentialism. According to preferentialism, our well-being consists of correspondence between state of affairs and our preferences or most valuable desires or interests.9 If the state of affairs is

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> For explication and critics of preferentialism see Bradley (2009).

such that it is in accordance with our desires, then it is good for us, we are benefited. And if the state of affairs is in disharmony with our desires, then it is bad for us, we are harmed. What is important, according to preferentialism, is not our subjective feeling of satisfaction or frustration, but the state of affairs or fact of the world. What we know, believe, or feel about that fact, according to preferentialism, is not part of our well-being. For example, the fact that your best friend despises you, or the fact that your colleagues slander you behind your back, or the fact that your partner is cheating on you, presents harm to you. These facts are opposite to your desires or your interests, that you have a real friend, good reputation at work, and faithful partner. And, according to preferentialism, your level of well-being will not slightly change if you know those facts or not. Believing or feeling are just subjective reactions toward objective state of affairs, that is, toward objective level of wellbeing. And if we did not know, believe or feel anything about this, nothing from the perspective of our well-being would change. Everything would remain the same. It is obvious why preferentialism fits very well with the claim that death is bad for the person who dies. According to preferentialism, death precludes realisation of some valuable desires, which realisation depends on us, and non-realisation of a particular state of affairs is bad for us even if we do not know or feel that and even if we will never know or feel that. Therefore, from preferentialism we have got non-experiential conception of harm.

Students' reactions toward this preferentialist story are twofold. They perfectly realise that death can be bad for the person who dies iff there is a non-experiential harm. And they want to defend the claim that death is bad for the person who dies in a materialistic framework. They want non-experiential harm for that purpose, but they are not easily ready to accept further consequences of the same view. The first consequence is that we can be full of benefit - because the state of affairs corresponds with our desires - and at the same time live a life full of tremendous suffering. Can we say, for example, that the life of Vincent van Gogh, a life full of suffering, is a good life because his valuable desire to become a famous painter is realised after his death? It seems not. The second consequence is that we can be full of harm and live a life full of enjoyment. Can we say that a life full of enjoyment is a bad life because the state of affairs is not in correspondence with our desires, even if we do not know that during our entire life? Some students think that this is hard to believe, and they are trapped. At the same time, they want to defend the conception of non-experiential harm in order to defend the badness of death for the person who dies, but they don't want to accept the well-being theory which

presupposes a completely non-experiential conception of harm and benefit. In other words, they do not want to accept the completely non-experiential conception of harm

Once we eliminate hedonistic aspects from our well-being, then suffering and enjoyment, and also knowledge or believing of some state of affairs, are not the ingredients of our well-being anymore. But, to be cheated, to be despised, to be slandered, does not seem such a bad thing if there will be no bad consequences at all on our lives. If we, in principle, can never know, can never feel, can never suffer from such a state of affairs, where is that putative harm? If we, in principle, can never know, can never feel, can never enjoy from some state of affairs, where is that putative benefit? Confronted with that sort of questions, students are deeply immersed into philosophy of well-being. And the defence of death's badness depends on some theory of well-being, hedonism or preferentialism, because a particular conception of harm decides death's badness. So, the starting point has been the necessity of non-experiential harm in order to defend the badness of death for the person who dies, and defending such kind of harm brings us to the theories of well-being. If students defend preferentialism, then they can justify nonexperiential harm and the badness of death. But, if a preferentialist's consequences are unacceptable for them, and they want some hedonistic aspect in the theory of well-being as a necessary ingredient, then they should abandon preferentialism and the conception of non-experiential harm. If they abandon non-experiential harm, they should also abandon their starting position that death is bad for the person who dies. They cannot have both, the hedonistic account of well-being and the nonexperiential conception of death badness for the person who dies. Once more, there is no easy solution.

#### 5 Conclusion

When we teach metaphysics, we can start from the philosophy of death. Death is something that is concrete and ubiquitous. Death is an everyday fact, and students are naturally prone to think about death. Of course, not every student is prone to think on metaphysical themes, but if they want to think about death they must think of them. Death is a way, or shortcut, to most puzzling metaphysical questions. One of these questions is certainly the nature of time. Without metaphysical theories of time, presentism or eternalism, we cannot solve or even clearly formulate the problem of the subject in the value of death discussion. The introduction of

metaphysics of time into the death discussion is natural and logical. If you want a solution to a subject problem, you must defend some metaphysical theory of time. The same is with the problem of personal identity. It is not necessary that we start teaching personal identity theories from the very beginning of philosophical study. We can start from the philosophy of death. When exactly we cease to exist and what the relation between death and non-existence is, cannot be answered before we resolve the question of personal identity through time. When we cease to exist depends on the fact what we are, a psychological person or human animal that is, it depends on the metaphysical theories of personism or animalism. Students find themselves in a metaphysical discussion of personal identity without any effort or previous possible interest in personal identity. It is natural and necessary to think of personal identity when we think of death. And finally, the same is true for the discussion of the nature of harm and benefit. Students should not have a particular interest in that field, but the conception of non-experiential harm is a necessary ingredient of the claim that death is bad for the person who dies. Students who want to defend the so-called common-sense view of death badness could not do anything but defend the theory of well-being which presupposes such non-experiential harm. If that is not the case, if a theory like preferentialism is not defensible on the grounds of non-experiential harm and benefit, then death badness is also not defensible on the same ground. Again, students find themselves in this discussion naturally and logically. It is necessary to think about theories of well-being if we want to think philosophically of the badness of death.

In the end, the benefit of this approach to metaphysics is twofold. On the one hand, concrete problems of the value of death necessarily throw students into various metaphysical fields, as I sketched above. On the other side, questions and answers of these metaphysical theories can change students' pre-reflective value attitudes toward death. What they thought on an everyday common-sense basis, before investigations in the metaphysics, can be changed. Discoveries of metaphysical fundamental reality can change common-sense value attitudes toward death.

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