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Death: Why we should be grateful for it

17 October 2012 by [Stephen Cave](#)
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Congratulations – as a human, you know you're going to die. That's why you've learned some impressive cultural and psychological techniques to cope

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DEATH gets a bad press. Invariably the unwelcome visitor, arriving too soon, he is feared and loathed: "the last enemy" in the words of the Bible.

But a few poets and philosophers throughout history have argued that without death we would be at a loss. It's the prospect of his coming that gets us out of bed in the morning and drives us to great deeds. Now a growing body of evidence from social psychology suggests that these thinkers are right. People might dream of a deathless civilisation, but without death, there would barely be a civilisation at all.

The story begins with the awareness of our mortality. Like all living things, we struggle to survive. Yet unlike other creatures - as far as we know, anyway - we live with the knowledge that this is a struggle we are bound to lose. Our mighty brains, so good at inferring and deducing, tell us that the worst thing that can possibly happen surely will, one day. We must each live in the shadow of our own apocalypse.

That isn't easy. Indeed, it is terrifying and potentially paralysing. So we work very hard to stave off death, to defy it for as long as possible or deny it altogether. All this frantic defiance and denial result in some of our greatest achievements.

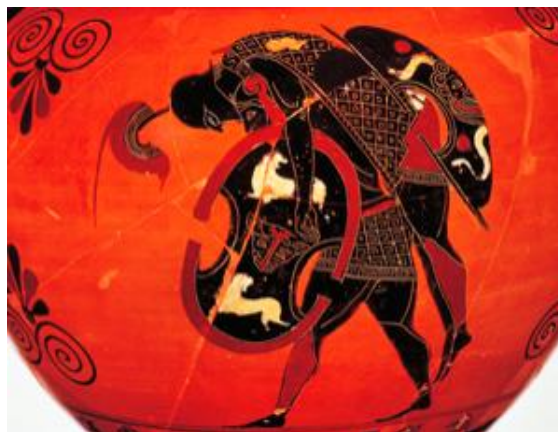
This is perhaps most obvious when considering humanity's material progress: agriculture, for example, was invented to give us the food we need to live. Clothes and buildings keep us warm and give us shelter, weapons allow us to hunt and defend ourselves, and medicine heals our sicknesses. The great majority of the material innovations that make up our civilisation are in essence life-extension technologies that we have been driven to invent by the spectre of oblivion.

Of all these achievements, perhaps the greatest is science. This, too, has always been motivated by the fear of death. Francis Bacon, the father of empiricism, described indefinite life extension as "the most noble goal". He sacrificed his own life to the cause, dying of pneumonia contracted while attempting an experiment in cryopreservation involving a chicken and some snow. Science is the business of self-aware mortals - the gods would have no need of biochemistry.

Despite the best efforts of science and technology and the very real improvements in life expectancy that they have achieved, the terrifying prospect of death still hangs over us. That is why humans invented culture as well as material civilisation. Many thinkers, from Georg Hegel to Martin Heidegger, have suggested that its purpose is to reassure us that even though the body will fail, we will still live on. One scholar in this tradition was the anthropologist Ernest Becker, whose 1973 book *The Denial of Death* won the Pulitzer prize. It was this work that inspired a group of social psychologists to seek empirical evidence to support the speculations of the philosophers.

Clinging on

These researchers - Jeff Greenberg at the University of Arizona, Sheldon Solomon of Skidmore College in New York



Without death, would there be any civilisation? (Image: De Agostini/Getty Images)

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state and Tom Pyszczynski at the University of Colorado - came up with what they called terror management theory: the idea that most of what we do and most of what we believe is motivated by the fear of death. They surmised that if our world views exist to help us cope with mortality, then when reminded of our inevitable demise, we should cling all the more fervently to these beliefs.

One of their starting points was religion, a set of belief systems that arguably epitomise our attempts to assuage the fear of finitude. If religions really are offering existential solace, Greenberg, Solomon and Pyszczynski's thinking went, then when death looms, there should be a measurable increase in religiosity.

Which is just what they found. In one study they asked a group of Christian students to assess the personalities of two people. In all relevant respects the two were very similar - except one was Christian and the other Jewish. The students in the control group judged the two people equally favourably. But those students who were first asked to fill in a personality test that included questions about their attitude to death, and were thus subtly reminded of their mortality, were much more positive about their fellow Christian and more negative about the Jewish person.

This effect is not limited to religion: in over 400 studies, psychologists have shown that almost all aspects of our various world views are motivated by our attempt to come to terms with death. Nationalism, for example, allows us to believe we can live on as part of a greater whole. Sure enough, Greenberg and colleagues found that US students were much more critical of an anti-American writer after being reminded of their mortality. A further study, by Holly McGregor at the University of Arizona, showed that students prompted to think about death were not merely disapproving of those who challenged their world views, but willing to do violence to them in the form of giving them excessively large amounts of hot sauce (*Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol 74, p 590).

These initial studies supported Becker's bleak view that the denial of death is the route of all evil. It causes the creation of in-groups and out-groups, fosters prejudice and aggression, and stokes up support for wars and terrorism. For example, people who were exposed to TV images of planes flying into New York skyscrapers were more likely to support the invasion of Iraq. Terror management theorists initially focused on this dark side. But lately they have come to recognise the positives in our struggle with death.

For example, one of the most powerful forces shaping human culture is the desire to leave a legacy. Some of the greatest achievements of civilisation can be attributed to this urge, from the pyramids of Egypt to *Paradise Lost*. Now terror management theorists have demonstrated that, at least among undergraduates in the US, thoughts of death continue to stoke our drive to be remembered.

Socrates saw this 2000 years ago, arguing that much of what men do can be understood as a desperate attempt to immortalise themselves; women, he thought, could take the more direct route of having children. Several studies suggest he was right to see founding a family as a terror management strategy: one showed that German volunteers expressed a greater desire to have children when reminded of death; another that Chinese participants were more likely to oppose their country's one child policy when similarly primed.

A recent review paper by Kenneth Vail at the University of Missouri and colleagues catalogues the many ways that contemplating mortality can be good for us. For example, it can induce us to live more healthily by exercising more or smoking less (*Personality and Social Psychology Review*, doi.org/jfg).

The team also identify an important distinction between conscious and non-conscious death reminders. The latter - subtle or subliminal prompts - tend to cause us to cling unthinkingly to the values of our community. This can be positive if those values are positive, but can also be negative if they induce us to aggressively defend those values against others.

Conscious death reminders, on the other hand, stimulate a more considered response, leading people to re-evaluate what really matters. The more we actively contemplate mortality, the more we reject socially imposed goals such as wealth or fame and focus instead on personal growth or the cultivation of positive relationships.

Which suggests we do not yet think about death enough.

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