

Sample paper – objections and replies

Below are two copies (with notes included in the second copy) of a sample paper in response to the following prompt:

Critically discuss Marcus Aurelius' argument in *Meditations* 2.17 that death is not an evil. In particular, you should:

- Begin with a minimal introduction consisting only of necessary background information, your thesis, and a brief overview of the evidence for that thesis.
- Mention the name of the argument form and state the argument (either in a numbered list or in a paragraph). However, do **not** include an argument diagram.
- Explain what each starting claim of the argument means and why it is plausible.
- Explain what the conclusion of the argument means and why it matters.
- Identify and explain one strong objection to the argument, making sure to state which claim or inference it targets.
- Identify and explain one strong reply to this objection.
- End with a minimal conclusion consisting only of a restatement of your thesis statement in light of your discussion.

Is death truly bad?

In the *Meditations*, Marcus Aurelius defends the surprising conclusion that death is not bad: “It’s a natural thing. And nothing natural is evil.”¹ In this paper, after explaining why Aurelius might have found these premises plausible, I will consider the obvious objection that some natural things *are* bad. But, I will then suggest, Aurelius can reply by distinguishing what is bad in certain respects from what is bad overall.

Put simply, Aurelius’ argument is this:

1. Death is natural.
2. If something is natural, then it is not bad.
Therefore,
3. Death is not bad.

This argument is an instance of *modus ponens*, so the inference from the premises to the conclusion cannot be challenged. Let us therefore focus our attention on the two premises.

Aurelius begins his argument with the uncontroversial premise that death is natural. After all, death is a process undergone by all living beings, from the humblest clam to the most sophisticated human being. It is as much a part of nature as reproduction, growth, and nutrition.

Aurelius goes on to advance a second premise: that if something is natural, then it is not bad. Indeed, he might plausibly have made the stronger claim that if something is natural, then it is *good*. For making a friend, raising a child, composing a song, inquiring into the origins of the universe, running the long race –these pursuits are all paradigms of goodness, and they are also paradigms of what is natural for us to do. (Of course, very few of us take up all of these pursuits, but that is no objection: what is natural need not be universal.)

Aurelius takes the conclusion of the argument – that death is not bad – to have significant therapeutic value. For not only does death tend to produce great anxiety in us, but death is also impossible to avoid. How, then, should we respond to the fact that each of us is certain to die? Aurelius would suggest that we can alleviate our anxieties by realizing that death is not in fact bad.

Unfortunately, there is a natural objection to Aurelius’ argument: contrary to Aurelius’ second premise, it seems that what is natural is not *always* good. Certainly *some* natural things are good, but others appear not to be. For instance, disease is perfectly natural, but it also seems to be bad; similarly for aging. Indeed, death itself seems to be an obvious example of something that is both natural and bad.

However, Aurelius’ second premise is not as weak as it seems, for we must distinguish what is good or bad *in some respect* from what is good or bad *overall*. Consider a visit to the dentist to fill a cavity: while getting the filling is perhaps bad in certain respects, insofar as it causes the patient anxiety and pain, it may still be good overall, insofar as it protects her teeth from further decay.

In the same way, Aurelius may urge that disease, aging, and even death may be bad in some respects while still being good overall. My death will likely be preceded by some suffering, and when I die my life’s projects will end. These results will be somewhat bad. But the components of my body may then become the components of other forms of life – trees,

¹ Aurelius (2000, p. 23). Note that I will use the terms “evil” and “bad” interchangeably.

birds, people. These results will be very good. Disease and aging may likewise be bad in certain respects because they cause me anxiety and pain. They may still be good overall because they begin to break down my body so that it may be incorporated into the bodies of other living things.

In sum, Aurelius' argument might be best expressed as follows: death is natural, and if something is natural, then it is not bad *overall*. This way of expressing the argument avoids the objection that death is bad *in some respects*, while still retaining the therapeutic value that is so important to Aurelius. In particular, Aurelius might suggest that once we recognize that death is not bad overall, we will alleviate our anxieties over the certainties of our own deaths.

(767 words)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My interpretations have been heavily shaped by my discussions with students and faculty in the 2018 Philosophy and Political Thought seminar at Yale-NUS College. In particular, I have benefited from Prof. Sonya Wurster's incisive lecture on Stoicism, as well as from extensive peer review comments from Brian Cutter and Boyd Millar.

REFERENCE LIST

Aurelius, M. (2002). *Meditations*. Trans. Gregory Hays. New York: Random House.

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Commented [N1]: Treat your essay as a work of independent scholarship. Thus, include a title, but do *not* include the essay prompt.

Commented [N2]: I use only one quotation in the entire paper. I especially do not put quotation marks around perfectly ordinary words (“natural,” “evil”); that is unnecessary and would make for a thorny read.

Commented [N3]: I do not just say that I will present an objection to Aurelius’ argument followed by a reply. I also inform the reader – concisely – of the *contents* of the objection and the reply.

Commented [N4]: I am careful to match the argument form that I am using (*modus ponens*) *precisely, word for word*.

Commented [N5]: I identify the name of the argument form.

Commented [N6]: Because the first premise is easy to understand and obviously true, I spend very little time discussing it. But had the premise been sufficiently difficult to understand, or had the plausibility of the premise been sufficiently difficult to appreciate, I would have spent many paragraphs explaining it.

For any idea that you discuss, devote to it exactly the amount of space that it deserves.

Commented [N7]: Do not forget to include signposting in your topic sentences! Here I use the concise highlighted phrase to indicate that Aurelius is continuing the same argument.

Commented [N8]: I do not hesitate to give the strongest plausible version of the argument, even if it is not exactly the version that Aurelius himself gives. But I am careful to separate his version of the argument from mine.

the universe, running the long race – these pursuits are all paradigms of goodness, and they are also paradigms of what is natural for us to do. (Of course, very few of us take up all of these pursuits, but that is no objection: what is natural need not be universal.)

Commented [N9]: In explaining why this premise is plausible, I rely only on evidential claims that almost anyone can verify. It is extremely obvious that these pursuits are good, and also extremely obvious that they are natural.

Aurelius takes the conclusion of the argument – that death is not bad – to have significant therapeutic value. For not only does death tend to produce great anxiety in us, but death is also impossible to avoid. How, then, should we respond to the fact that each of us is certain to die? Aurelius would suggest that we can alleviate our anxieties by realizing that death is not in fact bad.

Commented [N10]: I anticipate that many readers will misunderstand the objection, so I briefly address the possible misunderstanding. Even here, however, I first explain the possible misunderstanding (before the colon) and only then address it (after the colon). It is important to separate these two steps.

It would also have been reasonable for me to address this possible misunderstanding in more detail in a separate paragraph.

Commented [N11]: I identify the significance of the argument.

Unfortunately, there is a natural objection to Aurelius' argument: contrary to Aurelius' second premise, it seems that what is natural is not *always* good. Certainly *some* natural things are good, but others appear not to be. For instance, disease is perfectly natural, but it also seems to be bad; similarly for aging. Indeed, death itself seems to be an obvious example of something that is both natural and bad.

Commented [N12]: I again use a concise signpost to indicate how this paragraph relates to the rest of the paper.

Commented [N13]: I identify the precise target of my objection.

However, Aurelius' second premise is not as weak as it seems, for we must distinguish what is good or bad *in some respect* from what is good or bad *overall*. Consider a visit to the dentist to fill a cavity: while getting the filling is perhaps bad in certain respects, insofar as it causes the patient anxiety and pain, it may still be good overall, insofar as it protects her teeth from further decay.

Commented [N14]: This is another concise signpost that indicates contrast. I use this signpost to signal that I will next discuss a reply to the objection.

Commented [N15]: I *immediately* tell the reader the exact content of the reply.

Commented [N16]: This example both explains the meaning of the reply and reveals the plausibility of the reply. Often you will need to separate these two tasks, however.

In the same way, Aurelius may urge that disease, aging, and even death may be bad in some respects while still being good overall. My death will likely be preceded by some suffering, and when I die my life's projects will end. These results will be somewhat bad. But the components of my body may then become the components of other forms of life – trees, birds, people. These results will be very good. Disease and aging may likewise be bad in certain respects because they cause me anxiety and pain. They may still be good overall because they

Commented [N17]: Again, my topic sentence includes a signpost.

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Commented [N18]: Include the acknowledgments and references in your word count.

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Commented [N19]: Do not forget the acknowledgments section. Make sure to cite by name the lecturer, your peer reviewers, and anyone else who especially contributed to your understanding.

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