

# Sample essay – objections and replies

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

Explain Marcus Aurelius' argument in *Meditations* 2.17 that death is not an evil. Do all of the following:

- Begin with a minimal introduction consisting only of necessary background information and your thesis statement.
- State the argument. Explain what each premise of the argument means and why it is plausible.
- Identify and explain one strong objection to the argument.
- 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.

Aurelius' argument is simple, so my sample essay is short. It weighs in at a scant 603 words. Your essays will likely be longer and more sophisticated.

## 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.”<sup>1</sup> 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.

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.)

Yet it may seem implausible to link what is natural with what is good in this way. Certainly *some* natural things are good, but many appear not to be. Disease is perfectly natural, but it also seems to be bad; similarly for aging. This objection targets Aurelius’ second premise, of course, but it also provides the basis for a direct argument against his conclusion. For death appears to be in the same category as disease and aging, insofar as all of these involve the decay of the body. So if disease and aging are bad, then death must apparently be bad as well.

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, birds, people. These results will be very good. Disease and aging may likewise be bad in certain respects because they cause me anxiety and bodily 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.

Aurelius may therefore say again: death is a natural thing, and there is nothing evil in it *overall*.

---

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

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My interpretations have been heavily shaped by my discussions with participants (both faculty and students) in the spring 2014 Philosophy and Political Thought seminar at Yale-NUS College. I am grateful for their support and even more grateful for their vigorous criticisms.

## REFERENCE LIST

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

---

Is death truly bad?<sup>1</sup> [I have added spacing to make the comments more readable.]

**Commented [NM1]:** Treat your essay as a work of independent scholarship. Thus, include a title, but do *not* include the essay prompt.

In the *Meditations*, Marcus Aurelius defends the surprising conclusion that death is not bad:

“It’s a natural thing. And nothing natural is evil.”<sup>1</sup> 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.

**Commented [NM2]:** 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.

Aurelius begins his argument with the uncontroversial premise that death is natural.

**Commented [NM3]:** 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.

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.

**Commented [NM4]:** 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.

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.)

**Commented [NM5]:** Do not forget to include signposting in your topic sentences! The function of such signposting is to relate the paragraph to the one before it. Here I use the concise highlighted phrase to indicate that Aurelius is continuing the same argument.

**Commented [NM6]:** 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.

**Commented [NM7]:** In explaining why the 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.

**Commented [NM8]:** I notice 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.

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

Yet it may seem implausible to link what is natural with what is good in this way. Certainly some natural things are good, but many appear not to be. Disease is perfectly natural, but it also seems to be bad; similarly for aging. This objection targets Aurelius' second premise, of course, but it also provides the basis for a direct argument against his conclusion. For death appears to be in the same category as disease and aging, insofar as all of these involve the decay of the body. So if disease and aging are bad, then death must apparently be bad as well.

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, birds, people. These results will be very good. Disease and aging may likewise be bad in certain respects because they cause me anxiety and bodily 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.

Aurelius may therefore say again: death is a natural thing, and there is nothing evil in it overall.

**Commented [NM9]:** I again use a concise signpost to indicate how this paragraph relates to the previous paragraph. "Yet" indicates contrast and is therefore an appropriate signal that I will be introducing a possible objection.

**Commented [NM10]:** Here I make it clear to the reader that the objection targets Aurelius' second premise.

**Commented [NM11]:** I do not wait until the end of the paragraph to tell the reader the exact content of the objection. I tell her now, so that she knows the purpose of the examples that I will be presenting next.

There are sometimes good reasons not to state the objection until the end of the paragraph, but I encourage you to experiment with direct topic sentences such as this one.

**Commented [NM12]:** We have learned that it is not illuminating to attack the conclusion directly *without* first showing why the argument for the conclusion fails. But I have already shown where Aurelius' argument might fail. So it is now fair game for me to provide a separate argument for the falsity of Aurelius' conclusion.

Notice also that I am trying to press the objection as far as the evidence supports.

**Commented [NM13]:** Another concise signpost that indicates contrast. I use this signpost to signal that I will next discuss a reply to the objection.

**Commented [NM14]:** Again, I *immediately* tell the reader the exact content of the reply.

**Commented [NM15]:** 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.

**Commented [NM16]:** Again, my topic sentence includes a signpost.

**Commented [NM17]:** My conclusion, though it is very short, subtly rephrases my thesis statement to incorporate the central idea of my reply. I do so just by including the word "overall."

The conclusion also contains the concise signposting term "therefore."

[Comments continued on the next page.]

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My interpretations have been heavily shaped by my discussions with participants (both faculty and students) in the spring 2014 Philosophy and Political Thought seminar at Yale-NUS College. I am grateful for their support and even more grateful for their vigorous criticisms.

**Commented [NM18]:** Do not forget the acknowledgments section. Here you should give credit to those who helped you develop your ideas. Err on the side of acknowledging too many intellectual debts rather than too few.

## REFERENCE LIST

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

---