

A Critique of the Aim to Die with no Regrets

By Eric Andreassen

Many have commented on the so-called "Crisis of Meaning" among the younger generations, and especially among young men. In their search for meaning, many young men have absorbed a confused mix of philosophies and ideologies. One concept which has been embraced by many, explicitly or implicitly, is the idea that one's intention while living should be to die without regrets. Typically, these young men do not accept religious or supernatural claims (they may identify as Christian, Hindu, etc. for cultural reasons, but these identities do not inform their beliefs beyond vague ideas of morality), and based on their own outlook they believe this life goal to be achievable, rational, and admirable. None of these beliefs hold water, as this work will intend to show.

To die without regrets means that one is perfectly content with how his life has played out. Human nature does not allow for such contentedness. Our desires are unlimited, and even the richest and longest-lived men will be aware that they could have lived longer and acquired more wealth. A stoic man may argue that he would not regret anything that he couldn't control, but this fails to solve the problem. None of us will always make the right choices, and the line between what is or isn't within our control is blurry. The stoic will find himself thinking "if only I had managed my money better", "if only I had pursued that girl", "if only I had quit smoking." Once he has exhausted the regrets that were actually within his control, he will move on to saying "if only I had raised my son better" or "if only I hadn't gotten in that car" when it was his son's choice to fall in with a bad crowd and there was no way of knowing the car would be involved in an accident. Another man may argue that all of the aforementioned desires, long life and wealth and family, are self-serving, and that he may die without regrets by knowing that he spent his life in service of a greater cause. Even granting for the sake of argument that this man has total control to reject these baser desires, he will fall short of fulfilling the greater ones as well. No man has done everything he could for his family or his cause, and even a martyr may regret that he has but one life to lose for his country. Thus, the one who resolves to die without regret will find himself sorely disappointed when the time comes.

Now, just because a goal is impossible does not necessarily mean that it is irrational to pursue. One who wishes to prolong his life will eventually fail, but in the meantime may find himself eating well and exercising. One who wishes to end poverty may do great works for the hungry and homeless. To determine whether striving to have no regrets may be a rational use of one's life, let us examine what all this goal entails. One wishes, in the final moment of his life, to not experience the pain which comes with knowledge of unfulfilled possibilities, or at least to experience as little of this pain as possible. One will experience other pains: the physical pain of dying, the sadness of leaving loved ones behind, the inevitable fear of death. One simply desires that an additional pain should not be added to the mix. It is, in that sense, a utilitarian goal. The reason why the moment of death is given this special attention is because we have a tendency to consider each subsequent event as having greater importance than events previous to it. One refrains from spending all of his money today because he wishes to have the money tomorrow. Remember that the young men in question lack conviction in an afterlife, and so are not considering any events after their deaths; death, being in one's mind the final event, therefore must take precedence over all other events. But death is not the final event. After one

has died, he is dead, and one who is dead could not care less what pains he did or did not experience at the moment of dying. A man who lives so that he may die without regrets lives for a moment that ends, and as soon as he has died it may be said that he wasted his life.

Since pleasure (or lack of pain) at the moment of death will come to nothing, just like all other pleasures in this life, devoting one's life to that moment can be no more rational than devoting one's life to enjoying pleasure in the present moment. Pure hedonism, living to experience immediate pleasure, is by no means a worthwhile endeavor ("All the people living for today" doesn't sound so good when the "today" in question was fifty-five years ago), but surely a hypothetical deathbed scenario at some point in the future is no more worthy of one's focus than the rest of his earthly life. A hedonist may well even convince himself that he will die with no regrets; a man who wasted his life drinking or playing video games could argue that he "lived life to the fullest" since he spent it doing nothing but what he enjoyed. To anyone else, such a man is a sad sight. When living by the premise that one ought to live for oneself, nothing of value will be achieved.

When someone claims that he intends to live so as to die with no regrets, he often considers this a respectable or admirable idea. Indeed, many may respect and admire such an aspiration as "humble," or will project their own morality onto the person by assuming that he would "regret" doing wrong or failing to do right. On the issue of humility, no description could be further from the truth. C.S. Lewis points out that a truly humble man will not think about himself at all. A father is humble when he gives up on his dreams of traveling to raise his child. A friend is humble when he cancels plans to stay home and comfort his grieving roommate. A man focused on himself: "what will I regret?", "how will I feel when the end comes?" is as far from humility as can be. Now, one may exercise other virtues (charity, kindness, discipline) if he feels that he would regret failing to do so. However, he is no more admirable for this than a crooked Boy Scout is for helping an old lady cross the street because he expects that she will offer him money for his troubles. If a man is nice to strangers and controls his habits because he would regret not doing so, he cannot be truly said to be kind or disciplined. If he had the opportunity to indulge in rudeness or excess without regret, he would indulge. When we claim such virtues as humility, charity, or discipline as being "moral," we are claiming that they are greater than oneself, greater than one's own desires. A man who practices such virtues only insofar as they serve his desires cannot, therefore, be considered moral. If there exists anything greater than oneself, the idea of living solely for oneself is unthinkable.

What then should one live for? The only answer that seems satisfactory is that one should live for God, a being both maximally great and everlasting. To the young man lacking religious conviction, this answer will be wholly unconvincing. He will thus need to look for something else that could possibly be greater than himself. This will not be found in living for money, or sex, or travel, or respect, or hobbies. All of these are pleasures of the self, and while they may improve one's character if enjoyed correctly, they nonetheless cannot be greater than the self itself. One may look to family and country as worthy causes for dedicating one's life, and here we see more promise. Whatever in him is worth living for must also be worth living for in his kin and countrymen. In these he finds something that will outlast him: his children will carry on his name, and the next generation will inherit the land. The question then becomes: why stop there? Whatever in his family and country is worth living for in his friends, his peers, and those he meets on the street. It is worth living for in those he has never met and those he does not

like. It is worth living for in his cruel boss, his ex-wife, and the drunkard on the street corner. If the young man forgets his own concerns and regrets, and lives for the sake of his fellow man, he will find the first glimmer of a life worth living.