

Our destinies are inevitable (death & taxes!) but is our journey getting there?

Benjamin Franklin once wrote, with his characteristic wit, that “in this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes.”¹ His observation has endured precisely because it confronts us with two inescapable realities: the certainty of mortality and the persistence of the state’s claim upon our labour. Both are inevitable, yet the way in which we approach them, the journey towards the grave and the yearly reckoning with the tax office, is far less certain. It is this tension, between inevitability and unpredictability, that makes our human condition both tragic and strangely liberating.

In my own life, I have felt this paradox deeply. From early brushes with bureaucracy to the silent presence of mortality during moments of illness or loss, the sense of certainty has always lingered. Yet what lay in between, the “journey getting there”, has often been unpredictable, full of diversions, setbacks, and moments of clarity. This essay reflects upon that journey, asking: if death and taxes are inevitable, how do we live meaningfully on the road toward them?

The purpose of this reflection is not to deny inevitability but to examine its implications. I will consider the philosophical underpinnings of inevitability, draw upon historical and cultural perspectives, and reflect personally upon what it means to live under this double shadow.

Death and taxation are hardly new concerns. The Stoics, for example, emphasised *memento mori*, the reminder of death, as a central discipline. Marcus Aurelius advised: “You could leave life right now. Let that determine what you do and say and think.”² For the Stoic, awareness of death was not a morbid obsession but a compass for living virtuously. Taxes, meanwhile, have been equally ancient. From

¹ Jared Sparks, *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin, Vol. X (1789–1790)* (London: Macmillan, 1856), p. 410.

² Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, trans. Gregory Hays, New York: Modern Library, 2002, p. 35.

the corvée labour demanded by the pharaohs to the salt tax that provoked rebellion in colonial India, they have shaped empires and daily lives alike.^{3, 4}

Even religious traditions have grappled with these dual inevitabilities. In Christianity, death is the doorway to eternal life, while taxes were acknowledged by Christ himself when he declared: “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s.”⁵ Similarly, in Buddhism, impermanence is a central truth: all things, including life itself, must pass. To recall these perspectives is to recognise that our conversation is not new, but rather a continuation of humanity’s oldest reflection.

At the heart of the issue lies the distinction between destiny and journey. Destiny, death and taxes, is fixed. No human has escaped mortality, and few have managed to elude the fiscal grasp of the state. But the journey, the quality of life, the ways we respond, the meaning we extract, remains fluid.

Philosophers from Epicurus to Heidegger have grappled with death. Epicurus argued that death should not be feared, since “when we exist, death is not yet present, and when death is present, then we do not exist.”⁶ Heidegger, by contrast, saw *being-toward-death* as the essential condition of authentic existence: to live fully, we must acknowledge death’s inevitability and live deliberately in its shadow.⁷

In my own reflections, death has often been less a terror than a reminder. When my parents aged, when friends were lost, I did not feel paralysed but rather awakened to the urgency of the present. The inevitability of death, paradoxically, has given me motivation to live.

Taxes may seem more mundane, yet they shape our lives profoundly. Historically, they have been a source of both order and revolt. The American Revolution, after all,

³ Barry J. Kemp, *Ancient Egypt: Anatomy of a Civilization*, 2nd edn, London: Routledge, 2006, pp.192-194.

⁴ Judith M. Brown, *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989, pp. 236-237.

⁵ Matthew 22:21, *The Holy Bible*, New International Version, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1978.

⁶ Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*, in *The Epicurus Reader*, ed. and trans. Brad Inwood and L. P. Gerson, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994, [125].

⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Oxford: Blackwell, 1996, pp. 279–311.

was sparked by resentment of taxation without representation.⁸ In modern societies, taxes finance public goods, roads, hospitals, education, yet they are also felt as burdens. Every annual tax return reminds us not only of our obligations but also of the structures in which we live.

I recall vividly my first encounter with taxation as a young worker. The deduction felt unjust, almost like theft. Over time, however, I came to see it differently. Taxes are the price we pay for belonging to a community. The fairness of their distribution may be debated, but the inevitability of their presence is not.

So how should we approach these inevitabilities? One way is through acceptance. The Stoics teach us to accept what cannot be changed and to focus our energy on what lies within our control. Another way is through resistance: revolutions, reforms, and legal challenges remind us that while inevitability may remain, the *form* it takes can shift. Death itself cannot be avoided, but palliative care, medical science, and spiritual practices shape how we meet it. Taxes cannot be abolished, but their fairness can be negotiated. The guidance, then, is this: we must embrace inevitability without succumbing to fatalism. We cannot escape death, but we can die well. We cannot evade taxes, but we can strive for justice in how they are levied and spent.

Here, then, is the challenge to the reader: how do you live with inevitability? Do you flee from thoughts of death, clinging to distraction? Do you resent taxation without considering the social bonds it sustains? Or do you, like the Stoics and reformers, face these certainties head-on, seeking to shape your journey?

For myself, the performance has been uneven. At times, I have ignored death, living recklessly as though immortal. At times, I have grumbled about taxation while enjoying the benefits of public goods. Yet slowly, I have come to see that living authentically requires acknowledging inevitability and then choosing to walk deliberately.

One objection must be confronted: is the journey really ours to shape? Some might argue that social structures, economic inequalities, and biological realities limit our

⁸ Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967, pp. 89–93.

agency. After all, the poor face harsher tax burdens and shorter lifespans. In this sense, destiny encroaches upon the journey more than we wish to admit.

Yet here lies the paradox: though constraints exist, choice remains. Viktor Frankl, writing from the horror of a Nazi concentration camp, argued that “everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms, to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances.”⁹ Thus, even when inevitability and constraint converge, the journey retains a measure of freedom.

If the measure of our journey is not whether we avoid death or taxes but how we engage them, then the assessment lies in our attitude. Have we lived consciously, aware of our mortality, making choices that reflect values rather than impulses? Have we contributed to our communities through taxes while advocating for fairness? If so, then our performance may be judged authentic.

For myself, assessment has come in moments of reflection, at gravesides, in hospital waiting rooms, during financial reckonings. Each has asked me: am I living intentionally, or am I drifting toward the inevitable without reflection? The answer has not always been flattering, but it has been instructive.

In the end, the lesson is not merely intellectual but existential. To live well is to hold inevitability in one hand and freedom in the other. Death and taxes cannot be avoided, but our journey toward them is not predetermined. If we learn to accept inevitability without surrendering to it, we can live with purpose.

Thus, the paradox of Franklin’s quip is resolved. Our destinies may be inevitable, but our journeys are not. The challenge of life lies precisely in this tension: to walk consciously toward what we cannot escape, and in doing so, to discover meaning.

“Our destinies are inevitable (death & taxes!) but is our journey getting there?” The answer is both yes and no. Yes, we are getting there, death and taxes await us all. But no, the journey is not determined. It is shaped by our choices, our philosophies, our communities, and our courage. To live authentically is to embrace both

⁹ Viktor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1959, p. 4.

inevitability and freedom, to walk toward death and taxes with eyes open, and to shape a journey that is uniquely our own.

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