

Question 5: Is it rational to fear death?

In this essay I will argue that death is not bad for the person who dies, and hence is not appropriately feared. My position is known as the “Epicurean view”.

Caveat: I use the word “death” to signify “the state of being dead” (*OED* 2). It is uncontroversial that the process of dying can be a bad thing for a person. One can be conscious of dying, and dying can involve considerable pain and suffering. Whereas it is plausible to suppose that death does not involve conscious episodes. Some people deny this supposition – and if death involved a “conscious” afterlife in which there were “pain” or unpleasant experiences, it could easily be seen how death could be bad. But the Epicurean view presupposes – and I will assume – that death is the total and permanent annihilation of consciousness, and thus of the person.

The Epicurean argument can be formulated as follows (Rosenbaum 121-22):

(A) A state of affairs is bad for person *P* only if *P* can experience it at some time.

Therefore, (B) *P*'s being dead is bad for *P* only if it is a state of affairs that *P* can experience at some time.

(C) *P* can experience a state of affairs at some time only if it begins before *P*'s death.

(D) *P*'s being dead is not a state of affairs that begins before *P*'s death.

Therefore, (E) *P*'s being dead is not a state of affairs that *P* can experience at some time.

THEREFORE, *P*'s being dead is not bad for *P*.

(A), (C), and (D), the basic premises, are the only disputable ones – for (B) and (E) are logical consequences of (A), (C), and (D). Since (D) is true by definition, I will defend just (A) and (C).

The idea informing (A) is that, in order for something to be bad for a person it must be experienced as bad or in some way unpleasant by the person. On this view, since all bad things must be experienced and death is an experiential blank, death is not bad for the person

who dies. Philosophers wanting to resist this conclusion have objected to (A). Thomas Nagel famously argued that something can be bad for a person even though it is not experienced as bad or unpleasant by the person who is (allegedly) the subject of the bad in question (64-65). Nagel cited bad things that a person might not consciously experience: unknown betrayal by friends, and destruction of one's reputation by defamatory, false rumours of which he is unaware. Such cases are however logically compatible with (A) and so do not refute (A). All (A) requires for something to be bad for a person is that the person *can* experience it (perhaps not consciously) at some time, not that he actually experiences it consciously. That is, we can grant that what one *does not* consciously experience can hurt one, without granting that what one *cannot* experience can hurt one. There is thus a crucial asymmetry between death and the relatively uncontroversial examples of non-experienced bad things.

An intimately related consideration is that, for some event or process to be bad for a person, the person must exist when the event or process takes place. On this view, death cannot be bad for a person, since the person does not exist when death occurs. Nagel responded to this by characterising death as a loss to the person who suffers it, a loss that deprives the person who dies of the goods of life. Taking losses to be bad, Nagel concluded that a person's death is bad for the person. Nagel seemed relatively unconcerned about the proposition – a proposition he accepted – that once a person dies, that person no longer exists, and so does not and cannot experience the loss. Death is unlike the paradigmatic cases of losses that are bad for persons and instantiate the following principle:

A person *P* loses good *g* only if there is a time at which *P* has *g* and there is a later time at which *P* does not have *g*. If *P* ceases to exist when *P* dies, then being dead cannot be considered a loss of this typical sort in which losses are bad for persons. For in typical cases *P* exists after the loss, and so is able to experience the loss after it occurs.

Even if being dead is a loss, it is insufficiently similar to typical cases of loss that are bad for persons. Neither Nagel nor other proponents of the deprivation account offered special reasons or arguments why treating death as a loss enables us to reject (A). Hence their argument that death is a loss and is thus bad is unconvincing.

More recently, Harry Silverstein objected to premise (C), arguing that a person can in some way experience posthumous states of affairs. Silverstein thought the view that spatially distant events exist (but not *here*) and that temporally distant events do not exist “presupposes

a conceptual ontological framework that is significantly biased in favour of space” (110). Whereas on Silverstein’s view, temporal space is on a par with spatial distance with regard to existence; just as spatially distant events exist, so do future events. Silverstein thus had a possible way of negating (C): A person can experience states of affairs or events that begin after that person’s death, because such things exist atemporally (“during”) a person’s life.

Events that have never occurred and never will clearly can be objects of our psychological attitudes. For example, Britons in the early 1940s feared an invasion of Britain by the Nazis, yet that event never occurred. Britons dreaded being governed by Hitler, yet that state of affairs did not obtain and never will. Silverstein insisted that “the problem of existence constitutes the sole obstacle to the claim that posthumous events, like spatially distant events, can be objects of appropriate feelings and experiences” (111). So should we say that the events and state of affairs in the previous examples had to exist (and existed) for them to have been objects of fear and dread? Even if we say thus that the Nazi invasion of Britain existed (or exists) atemporally, it is nevertheless an event that Britons never experienced because it never occurred. This suggests something is seriously wrong with Silverstein’s objection to (C) – namely, a failure to distinguish the existence of an event or state of affairs from the occurrence of an event or state of affairs. Without such a distinction, Silverstein seems forced to the view that if events exist atemporally (as he believed) then events occur atemporally. But if events occurred and existed atemporally, there would be no difference between past and future events – and that is absurd. Silverstein should have distinguished existing from occurring events, or found some other way of distinguishing past from future events. It would be most plausible to say that for events or states of affairs to exist is one thing, to occur is another. One might hold that all events exist atemporally but that among the existing events, some have already occurred (past events) and some have not yet occurred (future events). With this distinction between the class of occurring events and the class of existing events, it is easy to defend (C) against Silverstein’s attack. (C) can be interpreted in terms of an event occurring instead of an event existing: *P* can experience a state of affairs at some time only if it begins *to occur* before *P*’s death. So understood, it is no good to object to (C) that posthumous events exist timelessly (during a person’s life), because this is logically compatible with (C). One would have to show that a person can experience a state of affairs or an event that does not begin *to occur* before the person’s death. I do not see how *this* can be done, and therefore conclude that Silverstein’s proposal is ineffective against (C).

The Epicurean view thus seems to be sound. And yet one might still object that it misses the point – that the badness of our deaths lies in our anticipation of losing the capacity to experience, to have various opportunities and obtain various satisfactions. Such anticipation is bad in that it is a source of displeasure. Yet the badness of the anticipation of death does not show the badness of death itself. The anticipation of either bad experiences or the inability to experience *simpliciter* can occur only while we are alive; it cannot occur when we are dead if being dead entails nonexistence. Therefore, we do not experience the anticipation of being dead when we are dead. In this sense, the anticipation of death is a pointless bad since it is a bad with no genuine basis, the object of it not being bad. Epicurus hoped that understanding this would free us from one bad, from one baseless source of anxiety. But even if this rational understanding provides little in the way of comfort, it is consistent with human dignity and intellectual integrity. And that, I think, is something.

Bibliography

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