Death
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Death has inspired much philosophical literature to go along with the existential dread. Indeed, much of the literature has explored the issue of whether the dread is justified; Epicurus and his followers argued that it is not, as they hold that death cannot be bad for the individual who dies (see stoicism). Although the Epicurean view seems unacceptable to most contemporary philosophers, it has its adherents, and many would at least concede that one can learn much from seeking to refute Epicureanism about death.

But what is death, and who exactly dies? Perhaps not surprisingly, both the proper definition of “death” and the selection of a criterion for death are highly contentious. If one takes it that death is the permanent cessation of life, this is both controversial (in that some would argue that we can live again after death) and nonreductionist, since we would need to define “life” (or at least have a firmer grasp on life than death). But life can seem as mysterious as death, and some philosophers have given up on the project of giving a reductive definition of death for precisely this reason (Feldman 1992).

There is also considerable disagreement about the proper criterion of death. In general, there is an important distinction between the concept of a thing (or, relatedly, its essence), on the one hand, and the criterion or criteria we use (perhaps in certain specific contexts) to pick out that thing. So, for example, a rash of a certain sort or a fever above a certain level might be the criteria for illness; they are “signs” of an underlying illness, but are not themselves part of the concept or essence of the illness.

Traditionally, the two standard (potentially conflicting) criteria for death were the “heart/lung” criterion and the “brain function” criterion. In cases in which there has been a significant brain injury, these criteria can pull apart; the brain function criterion for death can be met, whereas the heart/lung function criterion is not. Nowadays “circulatory/respiratory function” is preferred to “heart/lung function,” as the key notion is the functioning of the systems, rather than the presence (or even functioning) of particular organs. One can engage in respiration without the lungs when on a heart/lung bypass machine. Additionally, we would distinguish between a criterion that focuses on the whole brain and one that selects the “upper brain” (see brain death). A patient can irreversibly lose consciousness without being whole brain dead, which is usually meant to include the brain stem, which controls various autonomic processes. So someone in a “persistent vegetative state,” such as Terry Schiavo, could be upper brain dead but not dead according to the whole brain criterion or the circulatory/respiratory criterion. (For a helpful discussion of the various criteria for death, see Shewman 1997.)
In addition to debates about the concept, essence, and criteria of death, there are disagreements about who exactly dies, even when we are simply restricted to human beings. Is it a human animal? An embodied mind? This is a locus of intersection between ethical issues and the more abstract ruminations of metaphysics. Also, one’s more abstract metaphysical views about who we are could have implications for one’s views about death. So, for example, philosophers disagree about how to conceptualize our persistence over time. On one view, sometimes called “three-dimensionalism” (3D), persons are “wholly present” at each time at which they exist, and they (as it were) “sweep through time.” On this view, I am fully present today and (I hope) I will be fully present tomorrow, and so forth. (For a discussion of the relationship between certain 3D views and death, see Hershenov 2006.) In contrast, on “four-dimensionalism” (4D) persons are, as it were, “temporal worms” that are not fully present at any time; rather, according to the 4D picture, persons are “spread out” over time. On this view, we have “temporal parts” that are indeed fully present at respective times, and persons persist over time in virtue of the successive presence of their temporal parts. There is a good discussion of the relationship between the 4D view and death in Hudson (2001).

For the purposes of this essay, I’ll assume as working hypotheses that death is the irreversible cessation of life, and that we are fully present at times (as in 3D). One might distinguish between metaphysical and ethical issues pertaining to death, although the two kinds of issues are intimately related. I’ll start with the (roughly speaking) metaphysical issues. Here I find it especially helpful to consider the challenges to our commonsense views about death presented by Epicurus and Lucretius (and their contemporary followers): the “Epicureans.”

We can identify at least three (metaphysical) challenges posed by the Epicureans to our ordinary views that death can be a bad thing for the individual who dies. First, how can death be a bad thing for the individual who dies, since death robs the putative harm of its subject (see harm)? Given that the subject no longer exists, it is impossible for the individual to experience anything unpleasant or negative as a result of his death; how, then, can death be bad for the individual who dies? Second, when exactly is the time of the harm or misfortune? In general, when something is bad for an individual, we can identify the time at which it is bad for the individual – the time of the harm. But, given that there is no overlap between death (as opposed to “dying”) and the existence of the individual who dies, when exactly does the harm take place? Finally, given that we are indifferent to the period of time before we were born, and on the plausible supposition that death is the mirror-image of the time before we were born, why shouldn’t we regard our prospective deaths with indifference? (This “mirror-image” argument was added to Epicureanism by Lucretius. There is an excellent discussion of these three challenges in Nagel 1979.)

How can anything that does not involve pain, suffering, or otherwise unpleasant experiences be a bad thing for an individual? Of course, death might involve unpleasant experiences (if there is an afterlife and one is unfortunate). But our working assumption here is that death is an experiential blank; here, death is assumed not to involve any experiences at all. Thus, we can (for our purposes here)
think of death as a transition between living and being dead, or we can think of it as the state of being dead; in any case, it is (here) supposed to be an experiential blank.

Various defenders of the commonsense view that death can indeed be bad for the individual who dies have proposed cases in which it appears that something can be bad for an individual without involving any unpleasant experiences (for that individual). Consider, for instance, Nagel’s (1979) example of a man who is betrayed behind his back but never finds out. In Nagel’s example, people who present themselves as the man’s friends have get-togethers at which they pass scurrilous rumors and make nasty accusations about him, but he never finds out and never, let us suppose, has any bad experiences as a result of these meetings. Nagel thinks that the man himself has been harmed – a bad thing has happened to him – even though he never has any unpleasant experiences as a result of the secret meetings. Other philosophers have provided examples in which an individual’s right to privacy is violated, but she never discovers this (or experiences anything negative as a result); here, again, it seems that the individual has been harmed – her rights violated – and yet this badness cannot be explained in virtue of unpleasant experiences.

A proponent of the Epicurean position (that death cannot be bad for the individual who dies) might reply that in (say) Nagel’s example, the man at least can (in some sense) experience something negative as a result of the clandestine betrayals; after all, he could presumably find out about the meetings. Further, the Epicurean here will point out that death (by our suppositions) is crucially different from the case of the man betrayed behind his back; in contrast to this sort of situation, death makes it impossible for the individual who dies to experience anything. So the Epicurean will insist that nothing can be bad for an individual, if the individual cannot experience anything unpleasant as a result of it.

But the critics of Epicureanism about death have offered examples in which it is impossible for the individual in question to have any unpleasant experiences as a result of the putatively bad thing, and yet it does seem as if the thing is indeed bad for the individual. For instance, Fischer (1997) has presented a variant on Nagel’s betrayal case in which the man cannot find out about the betrayal, and yet in which it seems that the man is indeed harmed by the betrayal. Also, Nagel’s example of a person who is reduced to the mental status of a “contented infant” as a result of a stroke or brain injury appears to be a case in which the individual is indeed harmed but cannot experience anything unpleasant as a result.

Even so, these examples are not decisive, as the proponents of Epicureanism are quick to point out. Note that in the examples the individuals still exist. The Epicurean will insist that something can harm an individual only if the individual exists (to be the subject of the harm or misfortune) at the time of the putatively harmful thing. And, again, none of the examples adduced thus far are of the required form; after all, it would simply beg the question to invoke a scenario in which a previously existing individual has gone out of existence, and claim that this individual has been harmed in virtue of going out of existence (or in virtue of something coincident with his going out of existence).
It appears as if we have reached what might be called a “dialectical stalemate.” The defender of Epicureanism here will dig in his heels and point out that none of the examples has the form that would be necessary to show, in a non-question-begging way, that death can be bad for the individual who dies. In all of the cases, one is asked to extrapolate from a scenario in which the subject of the putative harm still exists to a conclusion about death – a fundamentally different state (in which the subject has gone out of existence). On the other hand, the critic of Epicureanism will defend the extrapolation. He will suggest that if it is plausible that (say) a betrayal that cannot be discovered can be bad for an individual, it is also plausible that death (although admittedly different in fundamental ways) can also be bad for the individual who dies. If it is the impossibility of experience that renders it false that death harms an individual, this should also apply to the cases of betrayal and brain injury discussed above. But intuitively the cases of betrayal and brain injury are indeed cases in which the individuals in question have been harmed. Thus, perhaps death can indeed be bad for the individual who dies.

The second challenge to the commonsense view that death can be bad for the individual who dies pertains to the timing of the harm or misfortune. In general, it seems that we can assign a time or temporal interval during which the “badness” of a bad thing takes place. But if death is indeed bad for the individual who dies, when exactly does the badness take place? Can it take place before death? Alternatively, can it take place after the individual ceases to exist? Either option might seem at least a bit jarring and unintuitive. The proponents of Epicureanism will insist that if death were a harm, we would need to be able to assign a time to the harm; further, they contend that any candidate for the time of the harm of death is unacceptable. But the proponents of the commonsense view have a range of options available as to the time of the harm of death. Some have argued that the harm of death takes place while the individual still exists and thus prior to death (Pitcher 1984; Feinberg 1984; Luper 2009). Others claim that the harm occurs subsequent to the time during which the individual exists (Bradley 2009). Still others contend that the harm occurs “eternally” – that is, at all times (Feldman 1992). Finally, various defenders of the commonsense view resist the attempt to pinpoint a time or temporal interval at which the badness of death occurs (Nagel 1979; Silverstein 1980, 2000). It is thus not obvious that we are forced to the Epicurean position in virtue of considerations pertaining to the time of the badness of death. Also, there are notorious difficulties with specifying the time of certain actions – say, the time of a killing – but it does not follow that killings do not take place! Perhaps we should here follow Aristotle’s wise advice not to look for more precision than the subject matter allows.

The third challenge posed by the Epicureans to the ordinary view that death can be a bad thing for the individual who dies stems from the “mirror-image” argument presented by Lucretius. Lucretius points out that we are indifferent to the fact that we were born when we were actually born, rather than earlier; given that posthumous nonexistence is the mirror-image of prenatal nonexistence, Lucretius commends to us indifference toward our prospective deaths. After all, the two periods of nonexistence – prenatal and posthumous – are entirely symmetric: if one
had been born earlier (holding fixed the actual time of death), one would have had more experiences, and if one were to die later (holding fixed the actual time of birth), one would have more experiences. Prenatal and posthumous nonexistence appear to be symmetric in their features, and thus it seems that we should have symmetric attitudes toward them.

Of course, the symmetry thesis only yields the Epicurean conclusion if we leave in place our ordinary indifference to prenatal nonexistence. But why exactly shouldn't the mirror-image argument cause us to reevaluate this indifference? That is, the mirror-image argument, strictly speaking, only shows (if successful) that there is no relevant difference between prenatal and posthumous nonexistence; it is itself silent as between adopting indifference toward posthumous nonexistence and concern toward prenatal nonexistence.

Further, it is not clear that the mirror-image argument is successful in showing that there is no relevant difference between the two periods of nonexistence. One approach to defending the commonsense asymmetry in our attitudes toward prenatal and posthumous nonexistence holds that, whereas it is metaphysically possible for an individual to die considerably later than he actually dies, it is metaphysically impossible for an individual to have been born considerably earlier than he actually was born. Given this point, any person who regretted that he was not born considerably earlier would be essentially wishing for something impossible, which is manifestly irrational. Call this move in reply to Lucretius's mirror-image argument the “asymmetry of possibility” reply. There are developments of this sort of reply in Nagel (1979) and Kaufman (1999). Note that, even if the asymmetry of possibility reply does not provide an explanation of the ordinary asymmetry in our attitudes (because presumably most people are unaware of the relevant metaphysical issues), it arguably could provide a justification for this asymmetry.

But it is not so clear that the asymmetry of possibility reply is adequate. Nagel himself presented a story he attributes to Robert Nozick, in which hypothetical creatures (otherwise like us) emerge from spores that are created many years before they typically “hatch” (Nagel 1979). In such a scenario, it seems that individuals would still have the same asymmetric attitudes toward prenatal and posthumous nonexistence that we actually have; and yet, in the scenario in question, individuals could have been “born” considerably earlier than they actually are. This suggests that the asymmetry of possibility reply is going in the wrong direction.

Further, it is not at all obvious that we could not have been born considerably earlier. (Of course, what is at issue is “metaphysical possibility,” not a narrower notion of possibility that takes into account actual conditions and constraints of feasibility.) Of course, the counterfactual, “If someone had been born considerably earlier than I was actually born, it wouldn’t have been me,” is presumably true; after all, such an individual would have issued from a different sperm and egg, had different genetics, different early experiences, and so forth. And yet it does not follow that it is metaphysically impossible that I have been born considerably earlier than I was actually born. After all, the counterfactual is rendered true in virtue of
features of the closest possible worlds where someone is born considerably earlier; in the possible worlds closest to the actual world in which someone (identified suitably) is born considerably earlier than I was actually born, that individual is not identical to me. But metaphysical possibility is a different modality from the modality expressed by the counterfactual in question, and such possibility is not read off the features of the closest possible worlds. Metaphysical possibility can be underwritten by less proximate possible worlds than those that ground the relevant counterfactuals.

Further, even if it is required for my existence that I have issued from a particular sperm and egg, this does not entail that it is metaphysically impossible that I have been born considerably earlier; after all, the sperm and egg could have existed considerably earlier. (That is, it is arguably metaphysically possible that the particular sperm and egg from which I actually issued have existed considerably earlier; this is on a par with the claim that it is metaphysically possible that I have existed considerably earlier.) Finally, it is not irrational to regret something, the occurrence of which is metaphysically possible but highly unlikely; I often regret not having won the California lottery, and so forth. Thus, the asymmetry of possibility reply does not seem promising to me.

I find the Parfitian reply more attractive. Parfit provided examples in which we have asymmetric attitudes toward past and future pains; that is, all other things equal, we prefer our pains in the past. Anthony Brueckner and John Fischer (1986) have argued that there is a similar asymmetry in human attitudes toward past and future pleasures, and that this asymmetry can help in replying to the mirror-image argument. Brueckner and Fischer say:

Imagine that you are in some hospital to test a drug. The drug induces intense pleasure for an hour followed by amnesia. You awaken and ask the nurse about your situation. She says that either you tried the drug yesterday (and had an hour of pleasure) or you will try the drug tomorrow (and will have an hour of pleasure). While she checks on your status, it is clear that you prefer to have the pleasure tomorrow. There is a temporal asymmetry in our attitudes to “experienced good” that is parallel to [although, of course, the reverse of] the asymmetry in our attitudes to experienced goods: we are indifferent to past pleasures and look forward to future pleasures. (1986: 218–19)

They go on to apply this point to the mirror-image argument of Lucretius:

Death is a bad insofar as it is a deprivation of the good things in life (some of which, let us suppose, are “experienced as good” by the individual). If death occurs in the future, then it is deprivation of something to which we look forward and about which we care – future experienced goods. But prenatal nonexistence is a deprivation of past experienced goods, goods to which we are indifferent. Death deprives of something we care about, whereas prenatal nonexistence deprives us of something to which we are indifferent. (1986: 219)
Whereas the asymmetry of possibility reply is not a very good explanation of the ordinary asymmetry in our attitudes, the Parfitian reply does seem to be a plausible psychological explanation of the asymmetry. But is the Parfitian reply an adequate justification of the ordinary asymmetry in our attitudes toward prenatal and posthumous nonexistence? This depends on whether one can argue successfully that the asymmetry in our general attitudes toward past and future pleasures is rational (see rationality). If our attitudes toward prenatal and posthumous nonexistence can be seen to be a special case of a rationally defensible general asymmetry, the Parfitian reply would be supported.

Given that the major challenges posed by Epicureanism can be met, defenders of the commonsense view that death can be a bad thing for the individual who dies typically explain this badness in terms of deprivation; death is bad, when it is indeed bad for the individual who dies, insofar as it deprives him of what would otherwise have been (on balance) good. Of course, there remain many unresolved disputes in evaluating the metaphysical issues pertaining to death. Also, there are many interesting issues at the intersection, as it were, of the metaphysics and ethics of death. Clearly, many of the most pressing ethical questions deal in some way or another with death: abortion, euthanasia, suicide, and the death penalty leap immediately to mind (see abortion; capital punishment; euthanasia; suicide). One of the best and most comprehensive treatments of the metaphysical and ethical dimensions of death is McMahan (2002).

Although of course a detailed exploration of these issues is beyond the scope of this encyclopedia essay, we might at least begin to see the force of some of the ethical issues by focusing, again, on challenges emerging from Epicureanism. Here, however, I think we can see especially clearly the implausibility of the Epicurean position.

If death cannot be bad for the individual who dies, we might wonder why an individual shouldn’t just commit suicide. But the Epicurean does have a reasonable reply here; his view is that death cannot be bad for the individual who dies, but it does not follow from this that any individual has a reason to bring about his own death. All that follows is that if death occurs, it cannot be a bad thing for the individual. (For an interesting discussion of this and related issues, see Warren 2004.)

But now we might ask what reason an individual would have, on the Epicurean approach, to avoid oncoming threats to his life. So, suppose one is standing on a railroad track and sees a train coming very fast; what reason does one have (according to the Epicurean) to step aside? Assuming that one could know that the train would kill one instantaneously (with no pain involved), why exactly should one step aside, if one is an Epicurean about death? It is a bit awkward for an Epicurean to say that one has reason to take actions to secure one’s continued life, since he does not think that death is a bad thing in virtue of depriving an individual of continued life. I suppose an Epicurean could say that it is better to live than to die, but that death is not worse than continued life; but this just doesn’t seem plausible at all. No doubt an Epicurean could come up with some reason to step aside, but it will seem, at best, contrived.
But there is an even worse problem for the Epicurean view. I do not see how the Epicurean could say that it is morally wrong to commit murder in certain circumstances. That is, if you were convinced that one could instantaneously and painlessly kill a hermit, with no one ever finding out about this act, why exactly would you have any reason not to do this, on an Epicurean approach? It seems to me that an Epicurean would say that you ought to murder the hermit under such circumstances, if it would give you pleasure to do so. Again, no doubt the Epicurean can produce some explanation of the impermissibility of such a horrific act, but such scenarios at least put considerable pressure on Epicureanism.

See also: abortion; brain death; capital punishment; euthanasia; harm; rationality; stoicism; suicide

REFERENCES


FURTHER READINGS


